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Jeffrey Friedman

LIBERALISM AND POST-STRUCTURALISM

Is post-structuralism antithetical to liberalism? Foucault—who may ultimately be the most influential post-structuralist *or* structuralist, because he links the rejection of objective truth with a renewed politicization of history—shares the hostility of many liberals to the state and to other agents of modern power, and thus can, despite his problematization of the very notion of the individual, be seen as a libertarian. Contemporary libertarians (natural-rights classical liberals) could only object to this characterization on the grounds that Foucault's thought (like Marx's) defines power too broadly. For such libertarians have generalized important and legitimate objections against socialism and the modern interest-group/welfare state into a creed of freedom which is to be narrowly instantiated in absolute private property rights. But since those rights are (nominally) valued by libertarians for their own sake, rather than for their beneficial economic, social or cultural consequences, libertarians should, but generally do not, allow that their doctrine has much in common with that of figures like Foucault and Marx who also oppose coercion, but who differ with liberals over the putatively beneficial effects of private property. When Foucault continues the Marxian project of "drastic liberation," in Frederick Crews's phrase, to the point of rendering it otiose by finding oppression everywhere in Western society, contemporary libertarians are echoed—despite being shown up as conservative in their obsession with mere physical power, ignoring the more subtle oppressions of economy, psychology, technique, language, the "gaze."

Yet there is more to liberalism than libertarianism, more to Foucault than a critique of power, and more to post-structuralism than Foucault. The libertarian/Foucaldian focus on Power distracts from deeper issues. Though one can imagine a Foucaldian—or a Derridean—libertarianism, a post-structuralist liberalism is implausible: for without a valid science of economics to demonstrate the fruits of liberal policies, and without real selves to enjoy those fruits, why would anyone want to sanctify liberty as a good, let alone as an ultimate one? Post-structuralists are critics not only of power, nor even of knowledge as a form of power, but of the validity of knowledge and the reality of the self.

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It is this critique that accounts for the liberal antipathy toward post-structuralism, even as it shows how libertarianism can undermine its own liberal foundations.

To liberal critics, then, the challenge posed by post-structuralism is epistemological and ontological, not political. It is the threat of relativism, or nihilism, to the individual and to truth as real entities, however constrained and inaccessible. Liberal anti-post-structuralism is, as Art Berman contends, akin to liberal anti-Marxism, but more for philosophical than political reasons. Yet they are not unconnected. The defeat of both the Marxist and post-structuralist relativization of knowledge will, the liberals claim, expose the anti-liberal arguments of Marxism and the anti-liberal mood of post-structuralism to devastating theoretical and empirical scrutiny. From their incommensurable paradigm, of course, the post-structuralists view such a claim as positivistically sidestepping the post-structuralist message.

Unfortunately, this issue of *Critical Review* does not entirely avoid the tendency of critics and defenders of post-structuralism to talk past each other. But there are enough direct hits scored that even the clean misses are instructive. Does the admission by deconstructionists that their own discourse is vulnerable to deconstruction—like the open embrace of "positivistic" science by their critics—undo them: or does it prove their very point? Do the exasperated tendencies of its critics to vilify post-structuralism's deliberately obscure style, and to embrace sociological explanations for its spread—like that of its defenders to attack deceptively clear Anglo-American writing, and to ignore the critics' arguments—signify anti-intellectualism and misunderstanding: or instead the presence, in a new form, of the central problems that have vexed philosophy since at least Hume? Such questions are, it is hoped, illuminated by the exchanges in this issue.

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Raymond Tallis

A CURE FOR THEORRHEA

FROM PRAGUE TO PARIS: A CRITIQUE OF STRUCTURALIST AND POST-STRUCTURALIST THOUGHT

by J. G. Merquior

New York: Methuen, 1986. 286 pp., $12.95 (paper)

Structuralism, as the title of Merquior's excellent book reminds us, originated in Prague in the 1920s; but it achieved its international fame at another time and another place—in Paris, in the 1960s, where it was associated with a wide range of disciplines. The structuralist megastars included the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, the historian and philosopher Michel Foucault, the political theorist and Marxist Louis Althusser, the literary and cultural critic Roland Barthes and the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Many structuralists, including some of the most visible and representative figures, such as Foucault, denied being structuralists at all or, as in Barthes's case, repudiated structuralism. What was repudiated was the reduction of structuralism to a body of doctrine or even to a clearly defined method mechanically applied to the matter in hand. Eventually the repudiation of structuralism acquired the status of a movement and post-structuralism—with Jacques Derrida as its central figure—was born. Now post-structuralism, too, is on the wane and it seems timely to assess the entire "post-Saussurean" movement. Such an assessment is greatly facilitated by Merquior's scholarly, comprehensive, closely and wittily argued account of the main trends and his fair and reliable exposition and dissection of the central ideas and characters.

The author's recent publications include *Not Saussure: A Critique of Post-Saussurean Literary Theory* (Macmillan, 1988); *In Defence of Realism* (Edward Arnold, 1988); and *The Clinical Neurology of Old Age* (John Wiley, 1989).

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Merquior begins with the origins of structuralism in Eastern Europe. His narrative properly grants a central place to the brilliant, innovative and prodigiously productive figure of Roman Jakobson (1896–1982). If a single individual can be held responsible for the seductive wrong turnings of post-Saussurean theory, Jakobson is that individual. His interpretation of the Saussurean breakthrough in linguistics and its application not only to phonology but also to criticism, aesthetics and social science was the crucial event in the history of structuralism, providing the theoretical base for the movement as a whole. The major figures in the movement acknowledged their debt to him and it is tempting to see his death in the early 80s, at a time when they too were dying, as symbolic of the end of an era of thought.

The Theoretical Linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure

Santayana's description of Spinoza as "one those great men whose eminence grows more obvious with the lapse of years. Like a mountain obscured at first by foothills, he rises as he recedes"[1] seems to apply with equal force to Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure's premature death, and the fact that his major advances were contained in lectures unpublished in his lifetime, add to the aura that surrounds his famous *Course*.

The notion most widely associated with Saussure's name is that of the *arbitrariness* of the linguistic sign. It did not, of course, originate with Saussure; nor did he claim that it did. He saw his own theory as a radicalization of the position of the nineteenth-century linguist William Dwight Whitney; and Merquior, who points out that the idea had considerable currency among eighteenth-century linguists, traces it back Plato and Aristotle. The importance of Saussure lies in his profound understanding of the implications of arbitrariness:

> No-one disputes the principle of the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign, but it is often easier to discover a truth than to assign to it its proper place. [It] dominates all the linguistics of language; its consequences are numberless. It is true that not all of them are equally obvious at first glance; only after many detours does one discover them, and with them the primordial importance of the principle.[2]

What was meant by the "arbitrariness" of the linguistic sign? It did not mean, as Saussure was at pains to point out, that the choice of which words to mean what things was left entirely to the discretion of the

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individual speaker. Communication could not function on this basis. No, the linguistic sign was arbitrary in the sense of having "no natural connexion with the signified":

> The idea of "sister" is not linked by any inner relationship to the succession of sounds s-o-r which serves as its signifier in French; that it could be represented equally by just any other sequence is proved by differences among languages and by the very existence of different languages: the signified "ox" has as its signifier b-o-f on one side of the border and o-k-s (Ochs) on the other.[3]

One could put this another way: words do not have meanings in virtue of the fact that their token instances resemble the objects they are used to refer to. "Cat" does not look, sound, smell, etc., like any cat and it wouldn't do its job better if it did; indeed, non-arbitrariness would be an embarrassment rather than an advantage.

But the assertion of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign *chez* Saussure cuts deeper into the relationship between language and extra-linguistic reality. The linguistic sign is, he asserts, a "double entity," one formed by the association not of a name and a thing but of a *signifier* or "sound-image" and a *signified* or "concept." Moreover, neither the signifier nor the signified enjoys an independent existence outside of the *system* of language; concept and sound-image exist as identifiable entities only within the system, and in this sense are intra-linguistic.

The signifier is a set of contrasting features realized in sound opposed to other contrasting features realized in other sounds—it is a bundle of phonic *differences*. This conception of the signifier led the way to the great advances in phonology—the analysis of the sounds of language—that was the main and still largely undisputed achievement of structural linguistics. Jakobson, Trubetzkoy, Hjelmslev and others were decisively influenced by the Saussurean intuition that the protean sound patterns of natural languages were underpinned by a universal structure, composed of a limited number of elements and a finite range of permissible combinations. The understanding that actual word-sounds served as the physical realization of abstract, contrasting sound-features opened the way to numerous advances in our understanding of phonological relationships between languages and of the way the brain extracts verbal tokens from the acoustic material served up to its ear.

The signified, too, is not a naturally occuring entity but a "concept"—and one whose boundaries are determined only within the linguistic system by its opposition to other concepts. Like the signifier, the signified is not a *thing* but a *value*; and it is valorized only within the

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system where it co-exists with other opposing or different values. It is therefore the *differences* between the linguistic units, rather than their positive content, that carry meanings. The denial of the pre-linguistic reality of the signified is the most revolutionary aspect of Saussure's theory—and the one that has generated the most lavish and exciting misinterpretations. The signified is not a "thing" "out there," nor is it a prelinguistic psychological entity; it is purely relational:

> The conceptual side of value is made up solely of relations and differences with respect to the other terms of language . . . differences carry signification . . . a segment of language can never in the final analysis be based on anything except its noncoincidence with the rest. *Arbitrary* and *differential* are two correlative qualities.[4]

Verbal meaning, then, is carried not by a relationship between a particular physical sound and a material thing but by the relations between one signifier and all the others and one signified and all others, combined in a sign. It is specified through an internal relation between, on the one hand, oppositions at the phonetic level and, on the other, oppositions at the semantic level.

Saussure put paid to a naive labelling theory of language, according to which sounds "christen" pre-existent referents. Language is not (to use Hughlings Jackson's witty phrase) "a word heap"—created piecemeal to label an external "thing heap." Saussure's insights marked a decisive and apparently irreversible shift in the science of linguistics from an "item-centered" to a system-centered view of language and inaugurated a linguistics that was concerned less with the relations between individual words and their seemingly autonomous referents than with the systematic relations between words and other words.

Few thinkers would nowadays dispute that language is more of a system than a word heap and that its component signs are arbitrary. And it would be difficult to deny that the semantic catchment-area of individual terms corresponds neither to patches of space-time nor to "natural kinds" (or "types of patches of space-time"). Moreover, Saussure's claim that "in language there are only differences *without positive terms*" seems to apply on the plane of the signified as well as more obviously on the plane of the signifier. Most people would be prepared to accept that linguistic value, as Saussure meant it, is purely negative or differential. What is in question is the use others—and in particular non-linguists—have made of Saussure's ideas.

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The range of post-Saussurean thought—or thought claiming descent from or validation by the ideas outlined above—is enormous. Within the space of an article of finite length, it is possible only to examine a few major themes and specific applications.

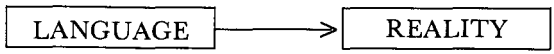
Structuralist Uses of Saussure: (i) The Relationship Between Language and Reality

Structuralist critics have notoriously been hostile to, or patronizing about, realism in literature and, more radically, have mocked "the referential illusion." Robert Scholes, for example, asserts quite baldly that structuralist criticism

> has taken the very idea of 'aboutness' away from us. It has taught us that language is tautological, if it is not nonsense, and to the extent that it is about anything it is about itself.[5]

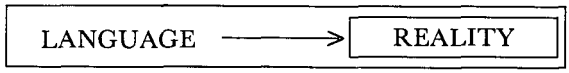
Do Saussure's ideas invalidate the common-sense view that language may be used to refer to an extra-linguistic reality?

Those who, like most people, subscribe to "the referential illusion" accept that language and reality are two separate realms but believe that the one—language—can somehow "reach out to" the other. This may be illustrated diagrammatically:



Post-Saussurean theorists claim to believe either that

1. reality is in some sense *intra-linguistic*, thus:



or that 2. that there is an extra-linguistic reality but language cannot reach out to it, thus:

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These views converge in the claim that reality is accessible to language to the degree that it is intra-linguistic. If it is further claimed that all structured awareness of reality is mediated through language, then we arrive at the position that reality is available to us only insofar as it is intra-linguistic—a position which may be seen as a linguistic version of idealism.

Weaving in and out of these more wide-ranging and explicitly philosophical theses about the relation between language and reality are certain ideas more specifically about the relation between *literature* and reality which have been grouped under the rubric of "intertextuality." "Intertextuality," like "ideology," is a magic word whose scope can be modified dramatically to meet the polemic needs of the moment. But the central notion behind intertextualism is that textual forces are more important than extra-textual ones in determining the form and content of a work of literature; that generic conventions are more influential in this regard than, say, the feelings and experiences of an individual writer or the properties of the reality he is apparently writing about.

The more radical accounts of intertextuality see this as an inescapable feature not only of highly stylized literary texts but of all discourse or, indeed, of *any*, however fragmentary, articulation of reality. This opens directly onto the claim that the referent itself is a textual fragment and the further suggestion that society or the world is a boundless text. Edward Said talks of wall-to-wall text and Julia Kristeva has suggested that the notion of intersubjectivity may be replaced by that of intertextuality. Since both reader and writer are texts, the consumption of literature, and indeed life itself, become matters of textual intercourse.

The specific thesis about literature, then, merges with the more general and more radical claims either that reality is intra-linguistic or that language is closed off from extra-linguistic reality. This has been famously advanced by Derrida in *Of Grammatology*:

> reading cannot legitimately transcend the text towards something other than it, towards a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical etc.) or towards a signified outside a text whose content . . . could have taken place outside of language . . . outside of writing-in-general. *There is nothing outside of the text* [there is no outside-text; il n'y a pas de hors texte].[6]

The idea that reality is to a greater or lesser degree intra-linguistic, that prior to language the world is formless and possibly senseless, has a long history that antedates post-Saussurean literary theory and, indeed, Saussure himself. But it was Saussure's claim that the signified was

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intra-linguistic, and that prior to language the mass of thought was shapeless, that led the first generation of structural linguists to search for evidence of this in the apparent relativity of fact to linguistic divisions.

What are we to make of these startling, and distinctly counter-intuitive, ideas? No one would wish to challenge the obvious truth that language is implicated in the construction of reality. What is at issue, however, is the *extent* to which reality is intra-linguistic and language the agent or medium in virtue of which reality is structured or constituted; more particularly, the radically nominalist assumption, common to many post-Saussurean critics, that the traffic is all one way: that language structures reality but reality does not influence the structure, the system of differences, that is language.

Now there is a sense in which it is correct to say that reality consists of what gets talked about: to be is to be the subject of an assertion. This is certainly true of social reality, and the transformation of an infant into a fully developed human being consists at least in part of a process of induction into an almost infinite set of discourses. Our knowledge of the world—as well as our sense of there being a boundless but continuous thing called "the world"—is "by description" rather than "by [direct or personal] acquaintance," to use Russell's distinctions. The realm of knowledge is verbally organized and access to it is verbally mediated. The reality that any individual inhabits is a vast inverted pyramid of discourse poised on a tiny apex of experience. Even this apex, moreover, is not uncontaminated with language; for we categorize, indeed make sense of, sense experience by generalizing it and so subsuming it under linguistic categories. Though *sensations* may be of particulars, *perception* involves classifying experiences under universal categories, the majority of which will be derived from, or enshrined in, language. Insofar as it is perceived, and enters knowledge, rather than being merely sensed, an object is at least nascently verbalized.

So much is incontrovertible. But does it force the conclusion that reality is intra-linguistic to such a degree that "realistic" discourses, and in particular those that seem to be "about" an extra-linguistic reality, are a kind of fraud? Are we obliged to believe that the manner in which reality is differentiated is an internal affair of language? Does it follow from the intra-linguistic nature of the signified that reality cannot be at once articulated and extra-linguistic? Must we accept the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that "we dissect reality along the lines laid down by our native languages"[7]? Or this more radical position, which Catherine Belsey claims to follow directly from Saussure:

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> It is language which offers the possibility of constructing a world of individuals and things, and of differentiating between them.[8]

—Or Lacan's yet more radically nominalist position that "it is the world of words that creates the world of things"?[9]

The example most often invoked in support of the structuralist contention that language structures reality, that factual reality reflects language rather than vice versa, is the vocabulary of color terms. The spectrum of colors is a continuum, but this continuum is invariably spoken of and, indeed often experienced, as if it consisted of distinct and discontinuous segments. The segmentation of the spectrum varies from language to language; this has been taken to imply that the perception and discrimination of even such basic sensory experiences as those of color are are determined by one's native language and invoked in support of the more general hypothesis that reality is experienced in accordance with the manner in which it is linguistically structured.

More recent comparative linguistic studies have cast doubt on this relativism, suggesting that there is a universal set of eleven color categories from which individual languages take different subsets. This evidence, however, though it may undermine the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, is an unnecessary weapon in the attack on structuralism since the linguistic relativity argument collapses under the weight of its own contradictions.

If it *is* a universal property of the human mind or brain to segment reality (or to impose its own segmentation upon reality) and to stabilize that segmentation through language, how is it generally known that the spectrum of colors is a continuum? What do we know it with, if not with the brain or the mind? ESP? And how, furthermore, are we able to *say* that it is a spectrum? It seems as if the linguistic straitjacket can be taken off at will so that it can be inspected and talked about: we—i.e., our minds—can compare reality as it really is (the continuum of colors) with reality as it is said to be or is conventionally perceived (the segmented spectrum). If we do commonly "dissect nature along the lines laid down by our native languages," it would appear that we are not always obliged to do so. Moreover, unless we could pick out bits of reality independently of language, we would not be in a position to observe how they are articulated in different ways and the essential evidence for the relativity hypothesis would be simply unavailable. The very fact that there is evidence for the relativity hypothesis constitutes evidence *against* the hypothesis. Moreover, as many semanticists have pointed out,

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> even though there is no corresponding concept in one's own language for a concept in another language, one can nevertheless provide a description (if necessary a very detailed description) of its referents.[10]

This is how we can *say* what it is that "they" or "we" do not have a word for.

The truth is that the manner in which the world is linguistically differentiated depends importantly upon the extra-linguistic needs of the community of language speakers. The fact that the Eskimos have terms to distinguish ten or more different types of snow, whereas Kalahari bushmen do not, is a tribute surely not to the degree to which language shapes our perceptual grids but to the influence of extra-linguistic experience and need over the development of language. In determining the way in which we speak about reality—and hence describe it—it is not only language that calls the shots.

The claim that articulated reality—or indeed reality itself—is intra-linguistic, is inspired by confusion between the Saussurean signified on the one hand and the extra-linguistic referent of the complete, functioning sign (a combination of a signifier and a signified operating in discourse) on the other. Only on the basis of such a confusion (epistemological as well as linguistic) could one get from Saussure's observations about the purely relational nature of the signified to the actual business of laying down "lines along which we dissect reality." The later, more radical "post-Saussurean" position that language is a closed system unable to reach out to reality, depends upon an even more radically careless handling of Saussurean terms, permitting thinkers to conflate: value with meaning and meaning with reference; the language system with its use on particular occasions; tokens with types; and even, eventually, the signifier with the signified. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that Barthes's and Derrida's intellectual stardom owes its origin to a willful, or at least a persistent, misreading of Saussure.

So much for the claim that reality is to a greater or lesser degree intra-linguistic. What of the belief that, even if there is an extra-linguistic reality, discourse is denied access to it? This position has been well summarized by Belsey:

> If discourses articulate concepts through a system of signs which signify by means of their relationship to each rather than to entities in the world, and if literature is a signifying practice, all it can reflect is the order inscribed in particular discourses, not the nature of the world.[11]

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Foremost among the many unwarranted assumptions implicit in this statement is the fundamental structuralist tenet that systems are, of necessity, closed off; since language is a system, it too must be sealed off from extra-linguistic reality. The structuralist belief that all systems or all structures are in some sense closed is articulated with exceptional clarity in Terence Hawkes's influential primer *Structuralism and Semiotics*. Language, he says, is a structure in the Piagetian sense. The transformations of such a structure "act to maintain and underwrite the intrinsic laws which bring them about, and to 'seal off' the system from reference to other systems." In consequence, a language is closed off from, or unresponsive to, reality:

> A language does not construct its formations of words by reference to patterns of 'reality', but on the basis of its own self-sufficient rules. The word 'dog' exists and functions within the structure of the English language without reference to any four-legged barking creature's real existence. The word's behaviour derives from its inherent status as a noun rather than its referent's status as an animal. Structures are characteristically 'closed' in this way.[12]

Hawkes's use of the word "behavior" is revealingly ambiguous. Of course, the word "dog" does not behave like a real dog. It doesn't, for example, defecate on the pavement. But this merely rules out of court a crude mimetic theory of language, the Laputan idea that words stand proxy for objects on a one-to-one basis. Knocking down this straw man, however, has a kind of carry-over effect; it is used to suggest that the word's behavior in another sense—the occurrence of its tokens and the verbal company they keep—is also unrelated to what is happening in the outside world; in particular to the behavior, including the perceived existence, of dogs.

Hawkes's characteristically structuralist assertion that "a language does not construct its formations of words by reference to patterns of 'reality,' but on the basis of its own self-sufficient rules," warrants further examination. Consider these three "formations of words":

the dog	is barking
the dog	is quacking
the dog	is deconstructing Medieval texts

The first formation is very common, the second very rare, and the third has probably never occurred before. How very like the corresponding situations in life! Is this purely coincidental? Or could it be that forma-

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tions of words are constructed by reference to patterns of reality? (And not by language but by language users, incidentally.)

The more general suggestion that all systems or structures are closed is, of course, false. The most spectacular of all self-regulating systems is the nervous system. The events that occur in it—waves of sodium ions crossing semi-permeable membranes—are highly arbitrary signs. It is the fact that the system is highly structured that makes those events—which elsewhere would be non-referential—into signals of what *is* external to themselves and to the system.

Behind the claim that discourse is closed is a confusion between the system (or structure) and the specific utterances or writings that utilize it—between two things, *langue* and *parole*, that it was part of Saussure's distinctive achievement to separate. And this muddle is reflected in the fact that it is unclear whether Hawkes is using the word "word" to refer to the token (a particular word used on a particular occasion) or the type (the same word used on different occasions). Obviously, no *structure* could determine or influence the use I make of it on a particular occasion and no *type* could legislate over its own occurrences. And, of course, the *system* is non-referential, in the same way as the structure of the cerebral cortex does not itself include a sensory field. The confusion between the system and use of parts of the system on particular occasions is crucial to the structuralist tenet of "the dominance of structure over event."

Let us return to the quotation from Catherine Belsey:

> If discourses articulate concepts through a system of signs which signify by means of their relationship to each rather than to entities in the world, and if literature is a signifying practice, all it can reflect is the order inscribed in particular discourses, not the nature of the world.

What she says, essentially, is that if language operates in accordance with certain rules and uses entities that are intra-linguistic, then all that language can express is those rules, and the reality that is referred to is intra-linguistic. The force of this argument depends entirely upon the false assumption that that which is expressed is that *by virtue of which expression takes place.* Or that *the meaning of what is meant is that by virtue of which meaning gets specified.* This is rather like saying that if I were to point to a dog, that which I point to is not really a dog but a pointee, whose properties reflect the rules governing pointing. Once it has been (incorrectly) assumed that that which is expressed is the means of expression, then the latter is bound to be closed off and reality will either be intra-linguistic or inaccessible to language.

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We may accept the validity of the notion that the meaning of lexical elements is *specified* by their relatedness to and difference from other elements; but this does not license the conclusion that their meaning in use is identical with this. As many linguists have pointed out, while the words in the lexical field derive their *value* from their opposition to one another, their *meaning* is fixed only in relation to a particular act of signification. Value and meaning are not the same; the former belongs entirely to the system, whereas the latter does not. The purely notional signifiers and signifieds are such values; they are not meanings. The intra-linguistic nature of the signified does not entail that meanings are intra-linguistic. To suggest that it does is to pervert Saussure's message.

Post-Saussureans, however, go further than suggesting that meaning is the same as value; they imply, or seem to imply, that the *reference* of a particular utterance or group of utterances is the same as the signified. By this means, the intra-linguistic nature of the referent is made to follow from the intra-linguistic nature of the signified, and language is closed off from extra-linguistic reality. This further step requires an inadmissable assimilation of meaning to reference. Meaning is general while reference may be particular, and the transition from one to the other involves the mobilization of deictic co-ordinates which, in ordinary discourse, are indubitably extra-linguistic. Reference, ultimately, requires a spatio-temporal reference point—most typically provided by the situation, indeed the body, of the speaker—in order to be achieved. Meaning, which is general, does not. There is no way, other than by extreme carelessness, one could assimilate reference to meaning. It is, however, a central carelessness, because it opens into the very heart of the structuralist tendency to overlook the extra-linguistic determinants of signification, the essential extra-linguistic supports of verbal sense.

The confusion between value and meaning, however, may be of even more fundamental importance for post-Saussurean theory than that between meaning and reference. For it is an essential pre-condition of the famous doctrines about the nature of meaning: that meaning is purely differential or structural, or that meanings are sets of differences; that meaning is a matter of binarily opposed forms and not of contents; that the whole of the meaning of "light," for example, lies in its opposition to "dark" and vice versa.

In practice, the meaning even of such obviously opposed terms as "light" and "dark" is only in part determined by their mutual opposition. They may divide the semantic patch between them through having a common border and they may give each other semantic shape through their mutual pressure. But this does not imply that meanings *are* those

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borders, *constitute* that pressure. It is values, not meanings, that are pure edges or borders, without content. For the opposition between light and dark is based on previously intuited meanings which are in turn rooted in actual extra-linguistic experience. If the terms did not already have such prelinguistically rooted meanings, then there would be no grounds for our seeing them as being *opposed* any more than, say, "light" and "custard" or "prime numbers" and "Roland Barthes."

It is a structuralist commonplace that the system allocates meanings to words because "there is no meaning without structure." But precisely the opposite is at least as true: there is no perceptible structure without intuitions of meaning. That this has not been appreciated is due to the fact that the methodological principle of structuralism, the basis of its procedures for discovering structures, became thought of as an intrinsic feature of the object under study.

(ii) Structuralist Literary Criticism and Critical Theory

The study of language is the curricular next-door-neighbor of the study of literature, and it is difficult to separate structuralist critical theory from structuralist theoretical linguistics. Indeed, it is the proud claim of structuralism that its critical theory is grounded, as previous critical theory has not been grounded, in an understanding of the nature of discourse itself. We have already seen how the critique of realism is supposedly justified by the "discovery" that language is not actually about anything (other than language). The scope of such a discovery would be such as to make structuralist criticism of realistic fiction as ill-founded as realistic fiction itself. To discriminate between realism and anti-realism on such fundamental grounds suggests an almost comical mixing of levels—rather like deriving a supposed superiority of cricket over football from the "discovery" that objects were not real physical entities, only constructs out of sense data.

Undeterred by considerations such as these, literary structuralism has been the source of many much-parrotted doctrines: the Death of the Author; the superiority of the writerly over the readerly text; the claim that realism does not represent reality, only creating the effect of doing so. Most of these doctrines are associated most famously with Barthes, to whom Merquior devotes the longest chapter in his book.

Foucault reduced the teller of tales from a person to an adjective and for Barthes "it is language which speaks, not the author."[13] The task of structuralist criticism is not, therefore, to elucidate the author's inten-

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tions, nor to interpret the work in relation to the author's thought and experience, but to analyze the work through its structure—the play of its linguistic relationships, its form, its larger order and its generic relationships. Structuralist critics are less concerned with the aesthetic and moral value of works in themselves than to use them to argue or to illustrate general theses about the nature of literature. The scope of such theses is often absurdly wide; for example this claim of Barthes:

> All modes of writing have in common the fact of being 'closed' and thus different from spoken language. Writing is in no way an instrument for communication; it is not an open route through which there passes an intention to speak.[14]

Or the almost self-parodic conclusion derived from an examination of a short passage in Balzac's *Sarrasine*: "Replacing the feudal index, the bourgeois sign is a metonymic confusion."[15] The history of the human spirit in a nutshell, garnered from a nutshell.

The tendency to treat works of literature as exemplary texts, argument points, has several consequences. First of all, evaluation takes a back seat. It would be no more appropriate for the scientific (or scientistic) critic, whose primary concern is to determine the general conditions of meaning of the text and reveal the symbolic system to which it owes its signifying capacity, to discriminate between or evaluate literary works than it would be for a linguist concerned to uncover the grammar of a language to prefer pretty or clever sentences to dull or plain ones. Individuals do not matter to the critic who has awoken from the pre-Saussurean item-centered misconception of signifying systems; and this applies to authors as much as to works. Indeed, the individual voice, the individual author, is an artifact, the product of a bourgeois romantic dream. For the text

> is a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture.[16]

The text isn't created by an individual whose communicative intentions are expressed in it; rather it happens in or through such individuals. They are the sites at which the text comes into being but not in any sense its origin. This, the Death of the Author, is a particular application of the general principle that individuals do not speak language but that language speaks through them. Such a principle, it will be appreciated,

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follows not from Saussure but directly from a pre-Saussurean confusion between *langue* and *parole* or a non-Saussurean confusion between token and type.

A further consequence of the structuralist approach is the dissolution of the boundary between literature and non-literature:

> If we accept the case for the primacy of the signifier, it becomes clear that the existence of the term gives no particular authority to the assumption that there is a body of texts with their own specific practices, which can be usefully isolated as 'literature' . . . it is not at all apparent that it is helpful to isolate other discourses . . . from the discourses we call literature.[17]

Literature, as Barthes said, is "simply what gets taught." There is no reason why the critic should confine himself to written texts at all; he could turn his attention to the great text of society. Eagleton, for example, suggests "trying on a literary critical analysis of a party." Such a "text," he tells us,"can prove quite as rich as one of the canonical works, the critical dissections of it quite as ingenious as those of Shakespeare."[18] This is, of course, one of the directions that structuralism has most famously taken, and we shall return to this shortly.

Eventually, however, post-Saussurean writers part company with individual texts altogether. In the absence of a defined object of study, criticism becomes a *jeu sans frontières*. It can spread itself across a variety of disciplines—anthropology, linguistics, sociology, political theory, psychoanalysis, philosophy and so on—without being fully answerable to the discipline of any of them. Alternatively, it may try to unify itself—in so-called "theory."

Richard Rorty has written of theory, understood as a general method of approaching texts or discourses, as

> a kind of writing . . . which is neither the evaluation of the relative merits of intellectual productions, nor intellectual history, nor moral philosophy, nor social prophecy, but all of these mingled together in a new genre.[19]

"Theory"—brilliantly renamed "theorrhea" by Merquior—is not to everyone's taste; for some, it seems a betrayal of literary criticism and even of literature itself. When a priest loses his faith, he becomes unfrocked; when a literary critic loses his, he becomes a theorist. Theorists, who are always playing something of an away match, often have to simulate expertise in, and superiority to, fields where they have not even grasped the elements. For "theory" is all about knowing all about theo-

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ries without engaging with them on their own terms; it is about being able to "place," for example, the General Theory of Relativity without having to know how to derive its fundamental equations. And this brings us to a principle that became increasingly important in post-Saussurean criticism: the reversal of relationship between critic and the work of art, between the critic and the artist. The connection between the transformation of literary criticism into "theory" and a change of attitude towards the literary work is particularly clearly expressed by W. J. T. Mitchell:

> Wayne Booth argues that the 'understanding' of the author's intention may be an insufficient goal for interpretation, and posits a process of 'overstanding' as the goal of a more ambitious criticism. This ambition is at its most scandalous when it claims to free criticism from its traditional subordination to 'primary literature' and asserts that criticism is itself a mode of creative writing. Most interesting recent criticism is not just 'commentary' or 'interpretation' of primary texts, but an attempt to clarify fundamental questions about the nature of literature, its relations to other arts, its place in the whole fabric of cultural, social and political reality—what one recently founded critical journal calls (by its own name) the 'Social Text.'[20]

Such a critic has no difficulty surpassing the work of art: "situating" it, he puts it in its place. The work is, in the last analysis, a piece of Social Text; it clearly has no author (the author is at best a personification of an echo-chamber of intertextuality); and it has precious little in the way of autonomous meaning. For meaning "is always constructed by the reader, the result of a 'circulation' between social formation, reader and text."[21] This is very exciting for the critic:

> It makes him a participant in the work he reads. The critic *creates* the finished work by his reading of it, and does not simply remain the inert *consumer* of a 'ready-made' product. Thus the critic need not humbly efface himself before the work and submit to its demands: on the contrary, he actively constructs its meaning: he *makes* the work exist.[22]

Hawkes cites Barthes's *S/Z* as "the exhilarating monument to this 'total' rejection of the critic's passive role."

S/Z is an extreme example of post-Saussurean criticism and would not be unfairly described as a textual rape, in which the critic breaks open the work and inseminates it with pre-conceived ideas that may or may not have anything specifically to do with the work supposedly under examination. Many hostile critics of post-Saussurean theory have com-

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mented on how the methodological lack of sensitivity to the individual work results in a tendency to find the same thing in every text—usually the same blindness or weakness or complicity with the dominant ideology, or the same potted Freud. This is particularly evident in post-structuralism, where every text is discovered, most importantly, to be in the grip of warring forces of signification, in short to contradict itself, in its vain attempt to achieve closure of meaning in plenitude and presence.

Merquior's concluding observations on literary structuralism seem entirely to the point:

> Thanks to the formalist binge, structuralist and post-structuralist criticism has never lived up to the challenge of deciphering the moral import of so much of the best of contemporary literature. The '*obsédés textuels*' never wrote a memorable word about Svevo or Musil, Canetti or Solzhenitsyn, Sciascia, Handke or Milan Kundera. And this is perhaps the worst indictment of structuralist criticism and its sequel. (182)

And on its most famous practitioner (who had nothing to say about modern poetry or—with the exception of Brecht—non-French literature):

> Thus he brought drama to the formalist idea of art as structure without content. In the end, Barthes made formalism speak the joyful idiom of libertinism; alas, all the bliss in it was merely the dark night of the blind sign, drifting away from the concerns of humanity. (188)

Merquior's contrast between Barthes and Benjamin is particularly illuminating. Benjamin, he reminds us, resisted the formalist drive of modern aesthetics, the dream of "objectless" art that divorced sign from meaning. Unlike Barthes, he retained a sharp awareness of the social and historical context of texts, and never, despite his close readings, forgot that literature, modernist or not, carried a rich moral message. Benjamin's great essays in criticism "are exercises in the retrieval of complex human experiences of meaning, value and vision." Barthes's criticism, by comparison, is more obtrusively clever but shallow.

(iii) Structuralist Social Criticism and Anthropology

Saussure postulated a general science of signs—semiology—of which linguistics would form only one part. The scope of semiology would be enormous. Semiology, to quote Barthes,

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> aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment: these constitute, if not *languages*, at least systems of signification.

The post-Saussurean theorists, however, went further. "It is far from certain," Barthes stated, "that in the social life of today there are to be found any extensive systems of signs outside human language."[23] And he inverted Saussure's declaration, asserting that linguistics "is not a part of the general science of signs, even a privileged part, it is semiology which is a part of linguistics." Semiology could take in the whole of meaning, for "there is no meaning which is not designated, and the world of signifieds is none other than that of language."[24] Social life and language are coterminous and the procedures developed by linguists for making sense of language can therefore be appropriately applied to the different systems of signs that constitute social behavior, institutions, etc. The social world as a substrate for Saussurean analysis: this is the central structuralist vision.

Barthes's *Mythologiques* unpacked an implicit or overlooked signifying content in apparently innocent items such as the haircut of an unworldly priest or the sweat on the brows of Romans in a film. He usually found hypocrisy, snobbery, nauseous sentimentality, cultural philistinism, or a "bourgeois" confusion of History with Nature in, or underneath, these signs. But he did not go the whole structuralist distance by trying to identify an underlying symbolic system. His *Mythologiques*, a "doctrine of scattered occasions," falls far short of Lévi-Strauss's world- and mind-encompassing intellectual project.

In the mythology of structuralism, the meeting between Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss in the States in the 1940s is regarded as crucial for the emergence of the most ambitious attempt to perform a structural analysis of society: structural anthropology. Lévi-Strauss has acknowledged his major debt to the phonology of Trubetzkoy and Jakobson—hence Merquior's characterization of structural anthropology as "a methodological scion of Saussurean phonology"—in which the primacy of structure and the search for binarily opposed sets of features were the main methodological props. Individual myths owe their meanings to, or are valorized by, the place they occupy in a corpus or matrix of myths, itself an unconscious structure mirroring the universal structuring tendency of the human mind. Lévi-Strauss speaks of "mythemes"—units of myth (analogous to the linguist's "morphemes" and "phonemes")—

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which signify only by dint of opposition to other units. Individual myths are at best variations upon themes, though there is no root or canonical form from which all the others are derived. A Bororo tale may be a transformation of certain Ge legends, the latter echoes of Tupi myths, which are in turn variations of the Bororo tale. There are no temporal origins, only synchronous, quasi-spatial structures.

Thus methodologically armed, Lévi-Strauss interpreted kinship structures, totemic systems, myths, and the ordinary rituals of everyday Parisian life in non-naturalistic and non-utilitarian terms. Every item made sense only in terms of the "matrix of meaning" to which it belonged, the structure within which it had value. The abandonment of item-centered analysis of cultural data meant a shift of emphasis from the analysis of human behavior in terms of its function for human beings to an analysis based on its *signifying* function and its place in a hidden symbolic *system*; from an interpretation of myth in terms of content to an interpretation that seeks to uncover the hidden form of which the individual myth is only a small part. Kinship networks merely embody abstract relations of consanguinity. Women in prescriptive marriage systems are compared to verbal "messages" sent from one clan to another. Incest taboos are subordinate to the needs of maintaining the linguistic order that preserves the meaning of these messages. Totemic species are "goods to think with," tools for assisting the mind's classifying play, helping in its fundamental project of segmenting the continuum of experienced reality, building human order in the mind's play with the stuff of nature. And how complex this play is! For example, the resemblance presupposed by totemic differences is not between individuals and the totemic signs but *between systems of differences*.

Merquior, who for several years attended Lévi-Strauss's seminars, describes his oeuvre with lucidity and panache and illustrates his account with succinct summaries of Lévi-Strauss's interpretations of specific myth sets. Consider, for example, the Trickster myth current among the Pueblo and other tribes. Lévi-Strauss tries to explain the place of the Trickster in the Pueblo world picture. He starts from the life/death polarity:

> Life, in their myths, correlates with the agricultural; death, with war. Now between war and agriculture there is mediation: hunting. For hunting is a means of getting food (as in agriculture) by using weapons, the very tools of war. Hence we have a triad: agriculture-hunting-war. How does it link up with our original unmediated polarity of life and death? Let's glance at our Indian myths again. In them, agriculture is often

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> personified as a herbivorous animal; hunting, as a beast of prey. The natural mediators between herbivorous animals and predatory beasts are scavengers, who eat carion yet do not kill other animals in order to eat. By being carnivorous, argues Lévi-Strauss, scavengers are like beasts of prey, and therefore like hunting; but they are also like food producers (hence like agriculture) in that they do not kill what they eat. Ravens and coyotes are notorious scavengers. Therefore, they mediate, through their bridging of the polarity agriculture/warfare, the initial antithesis of life and death, creation and destruction, inscribed in the character of the Trickster—et voilà!

Merquior's cautious critique of this kind of analysis strikes home. "Could it be," he asks, "that a very learned trickster is interpreting at will the Trickster myths?" (57–58)

Lévi-Strauss, for all his sophistication, exemplifies in an extreme form the innocence that characterizes so much of structuralist thinking, a fatal innocence to which ingenuity is especially vulnerable. Focused ingenuity fails to recognize that the techniques it employs open up the possibility of innumerable other interpretations rival to its own, each with equal claim to validity. This innocence forgets that it is possible to see any pattern or structure in any collection of data, in short to see anything encoded in anything else—by constructing an appropriate a posteriori code. Fourier analysis can interpret any time series (and hence virtually any process, whether rhythmic or not) as a combination of rhythmic sinusoids represented in different proportions; any aspect of nature can be re-described in binary digit form, so that binarism can never go wrong; and so on. The real test of any universal decoding of phenomena is whether it has predictive power and can take account of novel facts. Since Lévi-Strauss's huge and impressive intellectual constructions do not submit to these tests, they are on a par with the intellectual constructions of those fanatics who are able to unpack the future history of the world (including nuclear weapons and the AIDS epidemic—after the fact) from the Book of the Revelation, or those of a paranoid disposition who are able to read the next moves of the KGB from the facial expression of chance met strangers in the street. With only an infinitely pliable logic and their intuitions to guide them, the structuralists' journey into or away from truth is quite unfettered.

This may be why the symbolic system to which the individual myths belong seems to have been invented by Lévi-Strauss rather than discovered by him. As Raymond Aron (quoted on 212) asked: "What guarantees of scientificity does structural analysis possess? Does it not risk always succeeding once the analyst has the genius of Lévi-Strauss?"

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There is another, even deeper problem. The ultimate goal of structural anthropology is to encompass the whole relationship of man to the world and how he makes the world "his thing." In pursuit of that goal, the anthropologist assumes that human behavior is primarily signifying and that the individual signs belong to a hidden symbolic system. The fundamental *function* of behavior—to ensure the human organism's survival on a hostile planet—is given second place. This must, of course, raise doubts about its validity; it lifts human behavior entirely above the evolutionary process and points in the direction of idealism.

(iv) Structuralist Conceptions of the Self

Post-Saussurean theorists have famously attacked traditional—"bourgeois individualist"—conceptions of the self, denying the supposedly widespread belief that the subject is the constitutive center of its world and that the ego is sovereign. This attack has been mounted from several directions, as Foucault has noted:

> The researches of psychoanalysis, of linguistics, of anthropology have 'decentred' the subject in relation to the laws of its desire, the forms of its language, the rules of its action, the play of its mythical and imaginative discourse.[25]

In all of these, structuralism has had a hand.

The paramount influence, however, has been post-Saussurean linguistics, with its shift from an item-centered to a system-based analysis of both language and discourse. Just as words do not have meaning in isolation but owe their meaning to their relations to other words, to their positions in the system of differences to which they belong, so selves are not independent atomic constituents of society. The self is merely a set of social relations and these in turn refer to a larger, indeed infinite, system of relations, a symbolic system, which operates through the self but is largely unknown to it. When I speak, I do not use language and subordinate it to my own purposes; rather it speaks through me: I am not a fount of meaning but a conduit through which linguistic meaning passes; a linguistic site where differences play. Likewise, when I act, I do not operate as free agent upon the social reality outside of me but rather *I* am operated upon by *it*; for my actions have meaning only insofar as they realize positions in a system of which I have scarcely any knowledge. My own consciousness of the intended meaning of my verbal and non-verbal acts is almost irrelevant:

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> Once the conscious subject is deprived of its role as a source of meaning—once meaning is explained in terms of conventional systems which may escape the grasp of the conscious subject—the self can no longer be identified with consciousness. It is 'dissolved' as its functions are taken up by a variety of interpersonal systems that operate through it.[26]

Just as the content of the myth is subordinate to its form, so that its true meaning is not that which is perceived by the teller or hearer but rather the role it plays in the overall structure of myths generated to satisfy the universal and unconscious mind, so the individual's perceived intention or interpretation has little to do with the true meaning and motive of his actions.

The most spectacular decentering of the self was accomplished by a thinker who brought together structuralist linguistics and psychoanalysis: Jacques Lacan. Lacan worked within the structuralist framework that posited the human scene as largely as system of signs and made semiology a part of linguistics. But he extended the scope of semiology and the reach of language, of the symbolic order, beyond consciousness to the unconscious. The unconscious, he argued, is structured like a language and can be fruitfully analyzed using the terminology of structural linguistics. The very emergence of the self, the apparently stable ego, requires the mobilization of language.

There is insufficient space to do justice here to Lacan, who is at once one of the most extraordinary thinkers in the post-Saussurean archives and yet, in many ways, the most typical. Like some of the other prominent figures, he reached famous conclusions of an enormous scope on the basis of little or no clear-cut evidence: the unconscious is structured like a language; the world of words creates the world of things; the signifier, within the Symbolic Order, dominates over the subject; and so on. The reader of his *Écrits* will find very little evidence therein in support of his enormous, and exciting, theories about the nature of the unconscious and its relation to language; about the relations between the subject and the self, the self and the Other, the self and the Real; and about the manner in which external reality is differentiated into separate objects. Lacan's oeuvre may be described as an inverted pyramid of speculation (and dogmatic assertion) poised on a tiny apex of ascertainable fact. For example, the doctrine of the mirror stage of infant development, thanks to him widely accepted by experts on psychology, clinical psychiatry and physiology working in departments of French and English literature but not elsewhere, is developed in a paper marked by empirical error, self-contradiction and confusion.[27] The intrinsic merits

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of Lacan's oeuvre are slight; but his career and intellectual style are exemplary, symptomatizing just what is possible in post-Saussurean theory, and for this reason deserve some mention here.

Much has been made of post-Saussurean obscurity and of the right—indeed the duty—of the post-Saussureans to avoid transparent language. Lacan's style is the *reductio ad absurdum* of the structuralist flight from lucidity, the principled espousal of obscurity. (Lucidity, according to Barthes, is a rhetorical device that passes itself off as a natural use of language, an attempt to get the reader to overlook the role of language in structuring the reality it is expressing). The authors of a recent book on Lacan, for example, express the fear that, by rendering his ideas in plain English (so far as this is possible), they could "be criticized for castrating Lacan" and that "the expression of his ideas without his style is like spaghetti without its sauce."[28] Their anxiety over the heresy of paraphrase is well-founded; for clarity is the enemy of writers whose stylistic mannerisms serve to cover over difficult theoretical problems by making hard to pin down just what they are saying.

Malcolm Bowie (a sympathetic critic) tells us that

> a complete account of the characteristic features . . . of Lacan's style would include: the ambiguous *que*, disturbances of conventional word order, literal and metaphorical senses interwoven, periphrasis, ellipsis, leading notions alluded to rather than declared, abstractions personified, persons becoming abstractions, widely different words becoming synonyms, synonyms being given widely different meaning.[29]

The various reasons mobilized in defense of this style are instructive. For Eagleton, it "is meant to suggest that any attempt to convey a whole unblemished meaning in speech or script is a pre-Freudian illusion."[30] Bowie sees it as intended to keep the signified "as a palely fluttering presence behind the rampaging signifier."[31] (Post-Saussureans seem not only to believe that the signifier can be separated from the signified but also that this can be achieved by bad writing or weak puns. Merquior describes Lacan as "an athlete of the compulsive pun" [210].) Bowie also defends Lacan's style on the grounds that it reveals the contradictions inherent in all language. In accordance with the Lacanian habit of having your cake clinically and eating it surrealistically, however, he at the same time reassures us that "Lacan is the originator of a coherent and continuing tradition of scientific enquiry."[32] One could accuse Lacan of many things, but coherence and conformity to the traditions of science are not amongst them.

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Lacan's reputation, a post-Saussurean paradigm case, is instructive in other ways; it tells us much about the sociology of structuralism. For although the obscure style enabled deeply flawed ideas to survive much longer than they would otherwise have done, this alone would not have permitted his works to gain the ascendency they did. Post-Saussurean thought flourished in Paris for another reason, and one which the strange case of Jacques L. makes especially clear. It is the paradox of Parisian intellectual life, where the radical and remorselessly logical young seem to long to prostrate themselves uncritically at the feet of a dogmatic *maître à penser*; where those who despise all hierarchies and would question everything grant the Chosen One unquestioning belief. Bice Benvenuto and Roger Kennedy, in their sympathetic book on Lacan, have commented how the Parisian academic scene still has many features reminiscent of the Paris of the Middle Ages. One of these is the central importance of the personal lecture, which makes an air of omniscience and charisma essential equipment for the upwardly mobile academic. Lacan, like Barthes, Lévi-Strauss and Foucault, was certainly a charismatic figure and was able to evoke intense love from the members of his breakaway École Freudienne de Paris.

Like many post-Saussureans, Lacan thrived in an interdisciplinary setting, where no one could fully evaluate what anyone else was saying. He drew inspiration from an incredibly wide range of sources, as reflected in the opaque prose of *Écrits*, where allusion succeeds allusion so quickly one cannot escape the impression that he is just keeping ahead of the cracks in the ice. (It is tempting to think of his conception of "the mobile signifier," a hurrying emptiness creating the illusion of plenitude, as a displaced self-portrait.) It is no coincidence that he is, as I have already noted, most widely admired as a clinician, psychologist and philosopher in departments of English and French literature—by academics, that is to say, who have only a rudimentary awareness of the rules of clinical inference (and the fallibility of the processes by which diagnoses are arrived at), limited knowledge of current work in genetic psychology and little taste for sustained philosophical argument.

Post-structuralism: Jacques Derrida and the Re-reading of Saussure

The persistent claim that structuralism was not a body of doctrine but a method—maintained even by those who advanced specific claims about the nature of language, literature, consciousness and the self—made it

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difficult to criticize. This, along with the stylistic problems discussed above and the Parisian disinclination to question the notions of a *maître à penser*—especially if they were of such scope that the mind could not grasp them sufficiently to entertain articulate doubts—enabled structuralism to survive for a long time on promissory notes. It hardly mattered that "at the end of the day there is no actual demonstration of generative mechanisms, no real formula for mapped out transformations" (204), that "its reach remained greater than its grasp." The targets of any hostile criticism were elusive in another way, as many apparently mainstream structuralists distanced themselves from structuralism—as if structuralism itself were a set of differences from structuralism. Barthes came to scoff at his own "euphoric dream of scientificity," and he mocked the project of narratology at the beginning of *S/Z*, a work that marked a major change of direction. Foucault denied being a structuralist at all, feeling uncomfortable with its lack of historical dimension: for all its pious assertions of the need to distinguish History from Nature (re-asserted in Barthes's preface to *Mythologiques*) and its Marxist sympathies, structuralism seemed to postulate as the fundamental social reality frozen structures that scarcely seemed to participate in time itself, never mind to participate in history. The very universalism that Barthes mocked was exemplified in its most extreme form by structuralist, and in particular binarist, interpretations of social phenomena. Althusser was uneasy about the political inertia structuralist analysis pointed to: if the hidden symbolic system, rather than politics and history, lay at the bottom of society, then there was little that political critique and political action (both enjoying meaning only within the symbolic system) could do to change things.

For this reason, it is difficult to say when, and with whom, structuralism came to an end and post-structuralism began. Opposition to structuralism from within the post-Saussurean fold was, however, focused in Derrida's radical re-reading and deeper mis-reading of Saussure.

On the basis of this, Derrida concluded that language is so enfeebled that, not only is it unable to reach a genuine redblooded extra-linguistic referent; it cannot even reach a signified. This was soon widely accepted among the post-Saussurean writers. Derrida's argument, expressed with comparative lucidity in his famous essay "Differance,"[33] begins with Saussure's point that it is *differences* that carry signification. Phonemes, Saussure discovered, are "above all else opposing, relative and negative entities."[34] And the same is true of the signifieds; in language there are only differences. Since linguistic signification is founded on the play of differences and haunted by deferral of closure of meaning, it is riddled

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with "differance." Differance—a neologism intended to carry the fused concepts of difference and deferral—is "the nonfull, nonsimple 'origin,' it is the structured and differing origin of differences."[35] Since, according to Derrida, this principle of difference affects both the signified and signifying aspects, the sign as a whole is a matter of pure difference. This "play of differences" prevents there from being "any moment or in any way a simple element that is present in and of itself."[36] This brings Derrida to the conclusion that meaning—as it is carried by a particular discourse—is also a matter of difference and that it is an *effect* of language rather than pre-existing, and being expressed in, it. His final position is that the referent is purely negative or differential; from which it follows both that it is intra-linguistic and that it is absent or at least non-present. Language, consequently, does not touch extra-linguistic reality—discourse is an endless chain of signifiers.

It is interesting to set these observations against what Saussure himself had to say about the signifier and signified:

> one can neither divide sound from thought or thought from sound; the division could be accomplished only abstractly, and the result would be pure psychology or pure phonology.[37]

It is obvious that signifier and signified cannot be separated: a truly meaningless or signified-less sound would not be a signifier because it would not signify anything. And Barthes himself, in one of his more guarded moments—when he wasn't telling us that "literature is a galaxy of signifiers"[38]—wrote that a signifier "is purely a relatum, whose definition cannot be separated from that of the signified."[39] In order to arrive at startling and paradoxical post-Saussurean conclusions, however, it is necessary to forget this and to assimilate the signifier and the signified to the sign and the referent, respectively.

But of course, what is true of the signifier and the signified (which exist only within the system) is *not* necessarily true of the sign as used on actual occasions (which is not part of the system), as Saussure pointed out:

> Although both the signifier and the signified are purely differential and negative when considered separately, their combination is a positive fact; it is even the sole type of positive fact that language has.[40]

This caveat, however, is ignored; or, rather, overridden. Saussure, Derrida claims, simply could not face the implications of his revolutionary insights.

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So far Derrida's misreading of Saussure has not taken him much beyond the earlier post-Saussureans. We are already familiar with the belief that meaning is rooted in difference, that it is internal to language and that meaningful discourse consequently cannot reach out to extra-linguistic reality. Derrida's distinctive contribution, which builds on the errors of the structuralists, is to draw metaphysical (though they are claimed to be anti-metaphysical) conclusions from the negative or differential nature of the linguistic sign by extending supposedly Saussurean linguistics to natural signs and, indeed, to material reality. The structuralist misinterpretation of Saussure becomes the basis for a critique of the "logocentric" Western metaphysics of presence. This next step—expounded in *Of Grammatology* (abominably written, even by Derrida's standards)—depends on a spectacular misreading of C. S. Peirce, not only to support Derrida's structuralist view that discourse never reaches a signified, but also to prove his distinctively post-structuralist vision of a world hollowed out by the emptiness of signification, of incompletable meaning—a universe of nonpresence. Once the negativity of the signifier and of the signified are allowed to invade the sign as a whole, discourse, the underlying structures, the linguistic system, natural signs and, indeed, nature itself, then the "vertigo of displacement" implicit in the structuralist referral of meaning from items or events to structures and systems becomes free fall.

According to Derrida, Peirce showed that, since signs are interpreted and interpretation generates other signs, the chain of signs never comes to an end. Moreover, signs tend to originate out of signs:

> If a man makes a new symbol, it is by thoughts involving concepts. So it is only out of symbols that a new symbol can grow. *Omne symbolum de symbolo.*[41]

Signs seem to have other signs as their origin as well as their destination: the chain of signs is endless and beginningless.

Since the chain of signs could be broken only by the emergence of an uninterpretable sign—in short a meaningless object or event—the endlessness of the chain should cause no concern. It is a reflection of the intelligibility and coherence of the world. Not so for Derrida, who interprets Peirce's sign theory to imply that the chain of *signifiers* is endless; or that the signifier never reaches a signified. To confuse the sign with the signifier is of course unforgivable. But as we now know this kind of carelessness is *de rigeur* in post-Saussurean writing. Even so, this is a rather vulnerable move; and in order that the post-Saussurean confla-

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tion of sign, signifier and signified should become the basis of post-structuralist theory, a further confusing element is needed. This is provided by the introduction of the term "transcendental signified" in the following crucial (though somewhat opaque) passage. Since one sign leads to another *ad infinitum*,

> from the moment there is meaning, there are nothing but signs. *We think only in signs*. Which amounts to ruining the notion of the sign at the very moment when, as Nietzsche says, its exigency is recognised in the absoluteness of its right.

One is left only with "play"—the free play of the signifier:

> the absence of the transcendental signified as the limitlessness of play, that is to say as the destruction of onto-theology as the limitlessness of presence.[42]

The chain of signs never terminates at anything that is simply present. Indeed, presence is reduced to signs of itself—to traces. We never touch presence unmediated by signs—immediate presence, presence itself. Mediation is primary; immediacy but an impossible, elusive dream—the most intractable dream of "logocentric" Western metaphysics of presence. Thus Derrida.

It is, of course, untrue that the emergence of "meaning" results in the evaporation of presence to traces of traces. The paw marks are a sign to me of a lion. But, over and above their character as signs carrying a *general* meaning, they have particular existence as depressions in the dust. They are that which, on this occasion, means "lion"; but that is not all that they are. They continue to exist when they are not meaning and they have features that are quite independent of their meaning, or that are not involved in the specification of the meaning "lion." Their location two inches rather than two feet from a particular bush, their being dampened by rain, their being seven in number rather than six, etc., are not features relevant to the discrimination of their general meaning. Existing and signifying, being present and signifying something that is absent, are not alternative states. On the contrary, being a sign is predicated upon being an existent that is present.

This is not true, of course, of linguistic signifiers or signifieds, whose existence is virtual except insofar as they are combined in a linguistic token used on a particular occasion. (An actual token, by contrast, can both exist and signify: an uttered word is an event, over and above its

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specific signifying function. It can be captured, for example, on magnetic tape).

We are no more entitled to infer, from the fact that one sign may lead to another *ad infinitum*, that the signified is never reached than to conclude, from the fact that, since every effect is itself a cause and the causal chain is interminable, that there are no effects—that the chain of causes never "arrives at" effects. Of course, there is no "transcendental effect" which would bring the causal chain to an end; but this does not mean that there are no effects at all. *Omne causa de causis* does not imply "no effects/things/events."

So the Derridean argument traduces Saussure in this further way—by eradicating the difference between linguistic and natural signs.[43] This—as fundamental a misreading of Saussure as is possible short of seeing his writings as a polygraphic recording of a tremor—is an inevitable consequence of failing to see the force of Saussure's distinction between natural and arbitrary signs or to appreciate the true nature of the signifier and the signified. The fact that the signifier does not reach a "transcendental signified" should be cause for concern only if the signifier were the sign itself and the "transcendental signified" were a referent. And manifestly they are not.

The "transcendental signified"—a term much bandied about in post-structuralist discourse—is a useful smokescreen. It is used, variously, to mean: the signified; the meaning of a sign; the referent of a chain of signs in use; or the ultimate termination of the chain of signs—in plenitude or closure of meaning, in absolute presence, or in God. By conflating different ideas in this obscure concept, Derrida can convince himself (and, surprisingly, many others) that anyone who believes in the reality of the signified is thereby committed to taking on board "onto-theology and the metaphysics of presence." To believe that discourse reaches or entrains signifieds is to believe in the transcendental signified. To believe in the transcendental signified is to believe that the chain of signs comes to an end. This, in turn, implies belief in a final meaning that can be reached at some place where signs give way to absolute presence; belief, in other words, in God, Who is both absolute presence and final meaning. Thus the argument. Since most contemporary readers are liable to be atheists and since, too, Husserlian "absolute presence" is so elusive (as Derrida demonstrated in his book on Husserl), merging the idea of the signified with that of the *transcendental* signified is certain to discredit the former and to give plausibility to the idea that discourse is an endless chain of signified-less signifiers. The concept of the "transcendental signified" enables Derrida to move almost imperceptibly

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from the position that no sign opens directly onto a plenitude of meaning/presence, i.e. is under-written by God, to the claim that there is no signified at all, or none, anyway, that the linguistic signifier can reach out to.

The conclusion that *all* signs, not merely linguistic ones, lack signifieds is the inescapable reduction to absurdity—or the self-refutation—of Derrida's post-Saussurean position, rather than its "daring" conclusion. There is little or nothing in Saussure's writings to support the post-Saussurean conclusions that have been drawn from them. Derrida's mishandling of the basic terms in structuralist linguistics and his misconstruction of the concept of arbitrariness underlines the perceptiveness of Saussure's observation (apropos arbitrariness) that "it is often easier to discover a truth than to assign to it its proper place." To this we might add (as an epitaph for post-Saussurean theory):

Post Saussure non ergo propter Saussure.

From Prague to Paris

This review has given only the barest sketch of some of the more prominent themes in the tentacular post-Saussurean intellectual movement; and it has done insufficient justice to the book that occasioned it. I read *From Prague to Paris* (as, previously, Merquior's brilliant book on Foucault)[44] with growing intellectual joy. Responses to post-Saussurean theorrhea have tended either to an uncritical adulation, and proceeding as if the major positions had been established beyond doubt, or to contemptuous dismissal barbed with intellectually derelict *argumentum ad hominem*. Merquior's book falls into none of these traps; written from deep knowledge and understanding, it is a critique in the best sense. Anyone who wants to see structuralism and its successor in the round—where it came from, what it was, what its flaws were, why it believed itself, how it came to be believed—should read *From Prague to Paris*.

Merquior shows clearly how the new awareness of the nature of the linguistic sign that had such an impact on the Prague theorists need not have led to the aporia of formalism and the cul-de-sac of Parisian post-Saussurean thought. Mukarovsky, who combined a clean grasp of linguistic structuralism with a profound sense of the social context of literature, rather than Jakobson, might have been the dominant influence. Alas, formalist structuralism and the doctrines of non-referentiality won the day. This, Merquior suggests, may have been the result of a revul-

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sion against the existentialist cast of mind and the Cartesian philosophy of consciousness represented by Sartre. Sartre's high public profile, vast productivity, unparalleled scope, his omniscient dogmatism (that survived unimpaired many changes of dogma), his censorious moral and political stands, and his unremitting brilliance, must have made him an oppressive presence on the Paris intellectual scene. It is quite possible that the choice of an anti-humanist, anti-Cartesian, anti-existentialist, anti-historicist formalism, dissolving self, agency and freedom, over more humanist versions of structuralism was an expression of tyrannicidal or parricidal sentiments directed against Sartre. (Though, as Merquior points out, Derrida continues the Sartrean and Heideggerean tradition of a "bombastic translation of problems of being and knowledge into strident moral dilemmas" [226].) If this is the case, we may have to entertain the astonishing thought that post-Saussurean followers and believers world-wide may simply have been victims caught in the cross-fire of a family dispute within the Paris intellectual scene.

Although Merquior's book is consistently critical of post-Saussurean thought, its cumulative impact is far from negative. At the end, one feels *liberated* and freed to think again in those areas which Parisian structuralism had expropriated and one had believed to be irremediably confused. For there are, after all, valid insights behind even Derrida's enquiries. The elusiveness of presence and the unattainability of undivided self-presence, the failure of language to coincide with its objects, the intangibility of the self, the extent to which the individual is an individual rather than a mere instance through which social forces are expressed—these are themes which have troubled the best and deepest thinkers for centuries. For two or three decades they seemed to be in the keeping of writers who were often more flamboyant than competent. *From Prague to Paris*, enjoyably and authoritatively written, informed throughout by careful scholarship, wide cultural reference, good sense and wit, has blown open the post-Saussurean aporia and cleared the smokescreen of Parisian paradox and pun that shrouded so many areas of legitimate philosophical concern. For this deliverance, many thanks.

NOTES

1. George Santayana, Preface to the Everyman edition of Spinoza's *Ethics* (London: Dent, 1910), vii.
2. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (London: Fontana, 1974), 68.
3. *Ibid.*, 67–68.

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4. *Ibid.*, 117–18.
5. Robert Scholes, "The Fictional Criticism of the Future," *TriQuarterly* 34 (Fall, 1975).
6. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 158.
7. John B. Carroll, ed., *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1956), 213.
8. Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Methuen, 1980), 4. Cf. p.46: "There is no unmediated experience of the world; knowledge is possible only through the categories and the laws of the symbolic order . . . words seem to be symbols for things because things are inconceivable outside the system of differences which constitutes the language."
9. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977), 65.
10. Geoffrey Leech, *Semantics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), 29.
11. Belsey, 46.
12. Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (London: Methuen, 1977), 16–17.
13. Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 146.
14. Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (London, Jonathan Cape, 1967), 68.
15. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 40.
16. Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, 146.
17. Belsey, 144.
18. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 202.
19. Richard Rorty, "Professionalized Philosophy and Transcendental Culture," *Georgia Review* 30 (1976): 763–64.
20. W. T. J. Mitchell, "The Golden Age of Criticism," *London Review of Books*, June 25, 1987: 15.
21. Belsey, 60.
22. Hawkes, 157.
23. Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), 9.
24. *Ibid.*, 11.
25. *Ibid.*, 10.
25. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock, 1972), 72.
26. Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 28.
27. I have discussed Lacan's ideas extensively elsewhere. See, for example: Raymond Tallis, *Not Saussure* (London: Macmillan, 1988), ch. 5. A more general discussion of the post-Saussurean dissolution of the self is contained

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in Raymond Tallis, *In Defence of Realism* (London: Edward Arnold, 1988), ch. 5.

28. Bice Benvenuto and Roger Kennedy, *The Works of Jacques Lacan* (London: Free Association Books, 1986), 9.
29. Malcolm Bowie, "Jacques Lacan" in J. Sturrock, ed., *Structuralism and Since* (Oxford University Press, 1979), 145.
30. Eagleton, 108.
31. Bowie, 145.
32. *Ibid.*, 150.
33. Jacques Derrida, "Differance" in *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 139.
34. Saussure, 119.
35. Derrida, "Difference," 140.
36. *Ibid.*, 139.
37. Saussure, 113.
38. Barthes, *S/Z*, 30.
39. Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 47.
40. Saussure, 120–21.
41. Peirce, quoted in Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 48.
42. *Ibid.*, 50.
43. The failure to maintain the Saussurean distinction between natural and arbitrary signs opens the way to an extension beyond language of the structuralist claim that meaning is not intended by speakers but is an effect of language. For Derrida, not only are we unable to mean what we say; we cannot mean anything. We cannot intend our speech acts—or, indeed, any other acts—because we cannot specify the conditions under which they would make sense. The necessary context is "the boundless text of society." The critique of agency in speech leads to a critique of agency itself, of the expression of intentions, and of self-presence.
44. J. G. Merquior, *Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

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Art Berman

NOT SO FAST

NOT SAUSSURE: A CRITIQUE OF POST-SAUSSUREAN LITERARY THEORY

by Raymond Tallis

London: Macmillan, 1988. 273 pp., £33 (£10.95 paper)

That audible sounds can be made that differ one from another may seem an obvious recognition of a fact about language rather than a discovery. The assertion seems to define a necessary and incontrovertible structural property of language; and who could have ever learned to speak without having appreciated that this condition pertains?

Language and Empiricism

While the blatant linguistic fact may appear obvious (naïveté aside), the ramifications of a by-now notorious deliberation upon it have been both applauded and abominated. Ferdinand de Saussure argued that if one word is comprehensible only because of its phonetic differences from others, then those differences, not the individual words themselves, are the essential components of the linguistic system. There are "only differences," no "positive terms"; words do not exist separately, as independent tags for things. A word is what it is by virtue of what is absent: the rest of the system in which it functions (without which it is meaningless). Furthermore, the system that is a language is an "arbitrary" one, since any systematic configuration of phonetic distinctions, as the world's various languages attest, can serve the linguistic function.

The author is a faculty member in language, literature, and communication at Rochester Institute of Technology. His *From the New Criticism to Deconstruction: The Reception of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism* was published in 1988 by the University of Illinois Press.

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The phonetic patterning that characterizes language makes knowledge of the world accessible, for what we know is what we can think about, and language is, in this view, what constitutes thought. For the newborn child, before the acquisition of language, Saussure affirms, there is only the chaos of sensation. "In itself, thought is like a swirling cloud," we read in the *Course in General Linguistics*, "where no shape is intrinsically determinate. No ideas are established in advance, and nothing is distinct before the introduction of linguistic structure."[1]

The partitioning of the world, then, which is equivalent to knowing it, is structurally contained in the phonetic partitioning. Not a few of Saussure's interpreters conclude, therefore, that the world as we know it is structurally *derived* from the language we possess. Language does not correspond to the segmentation of the world but *is* that segmentation. Evidence for an "objectively" comprehensible external reality is jeopardized. Eventually one reaches what is in Raymond Tallis's book the critical question: What reasons have we for positing an external reality at all?

The structuralists, invoking an alliance with Saussure, confirm that while there is an "external" reality, what it is *for us* is inseparable from our language. Sound and meaning, the signifier and the signified, are an inseverable unit. The post-structuralists go further: since even the concept of "external reality" is contained in language and is not demonstrably a condition of it, "reality" itself is a construct of language and not superior to it. "Reality" is, in Jacques Derrida's terms, not a "transcendental signified." The presumption of the signified, of *things* signifiable, deteriorates.

Tallis's position, which is an attack upon "post-Saussurean" theory, is not, upon an initial consideration, necessarily hostile to the original structuralism of the 1950s and 60s, that associated with Lévi-Strauss's anthropology and with certain critical works usually addressing literature, those of Tzvetan Todorov, A. J. Greimas, Roland Barthes, and Roman Jakobson. Tallis does not, to be sure, express such an affiliation. He ardently repudiates it. Nevertheless, his position is that language—while neither "mirroring" the world nor naming "natural" properties of objects—plays a part (but not the only part) in organizing the world for humans, who strive to make *sense* of it. "The senses of an object . . . are determined to a great extent extra-linguistically. But they are not fixed solely by physical properties or by some other 'natural' classifying feature" (108). While Tallis opposes "the suggestion that linguistic relativity is *absolute*" (53, my emphasis), there remains the belief, resembling structuralism's, that language is how we make sense of the world: the

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making of such sense is a language-situated interpretation, not a mirroring. "Sense is not something that can be mirrored" (116).

Still, Tallis, unlike the structuralists, makes the "very real constraints" (102) of an extra-linguistic reality a large weight in the scale. The structuralists argue that even if such constraints are predicated, nevertheless, they can be known only *in* language, not *directly* as a cause logically prior to language. Tallis's purpose is to refute the negative proposition that a real world, *the* real world, is not accessible through language, as this proposition is elaborated in *post*-structuralism, which Tallis does not customarily distinguish from the originally Saussurean-based structuralism.

Derrida has written that all the researches of Lévi-Strauss were "empirical." He meant that, as an anthropologist, Lévi-Strauss believed that the accuracy or inaccuracy of his suppositions, and the relationship of his evidence to his hypotheses, could be ascertained. For Lévi-Strauss truth, as a correspondence of a statement and that which the statement is about, was a possibility. While that characterization is not quite accurate, since Lévi-Strauss allowed it is a matter of choice whether one privileges the language in which one works or the languages one studies, there is no doubt that structuralism rests within—although it soon moves away from—empiricism, the empiricism of Locke, which grounds, in the Anglo-American culture, the scientific method. Structuralism evolves from empiricism to "the critique of empiricism."[2]

Saussure argued, around 1910, that the sign consists of the fusion of the "signifier" and the "signified." As hydrogen and oxygen compose water, a new thing entirely, whose properties are not the sum of the properties of the components, so is the sign, like a molecule, not simply an additive combination. For Saussure, the signified is a "concept." Similarly Locke, speaking of language, asserted, like Hobbes, that words are "markers" for "ideas," obtained through the processes of sensation and perception. Any "articulate sound," writes Locke in *An Essay on Human Understanding*, can serve so that "a word is made arbitrarily the mark" of an idea (III,ii,1). Language is the medium by which humankind shares these ideas and the configurations of ideas that internal mental processes—themselves not quite explicable in the Lockean system—permit. Saussure's "concept" and Locke's "idea" are close relatives. "Facts of consciousness which we call *concepts*," states the *Course*, "are associated with representations of linguistic signs or sound patterns by means of which they may be expressed."

Locke's "ideas" that are the effect of "experience" and Saussure's "concepts" that are "facts of consciousness" are subject to the same

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critique, that of Hume. If what we designate through language are "ideas" or "concepts," then an epistemological problem arises: the inability of Lockean empiricism to demonstrate, even if it be true, that the ideas accurately reflect, or are indisputably caused by, an external world that impinges on the mind through a fundamentally mechanical process. Hume is led into skepticism. Kant later recognizes that empiricism's "idea" is defined inconsistently in various contexts, as image, concept, sensation, or perception. To correct the empiricist error, and escape the consequent skepticism, Kant redefines the "subject" so that it becomes the fundamental *given* of an epistemology rather than a puzzling deduction from an epistemology that cannot explain it, as it was for Hume, who could not, in introspection, find any entity of "self" (the subject itself) distinguishable from its contents, the contents of consciousness.

The function of language, then, cannot be properly understood without an understanding of what the self is presumed to be. Saussure, like Locke, accepts those traditional notions of the self—derived from Descartes, through Locke (who removed the innate ideas)—that have come under attack even in the empiricist environment, what Gilbert Ryle referred to as "the ghost in the machine,"[3] the self as traditionally seen: a unified and coherent *entity*. It may be that Saussure recognized that by affirming that the signified is a concept, he had simply repeated, not solved, the empiricist dilemma. Besides, he may also have seen that his belief that linguistic systems are arbitrary—since there is no necessary connection between any specific sound and any specific concept—cannot, even if true, be defended. After all, suppose (the unlikely case) that some phonetic system of differences were not arbitrary. How could anyone ever know? The *sound* structure of language would necessarily remain a system of differences. We may have a truism here. Perhaps for these reasons Saussure never published his theories. The *Course* is assembled from the notes of Saussure's students.

The fundamental move of structuralism is to accept Saussure's definition of the sign as well as his definition of language as an arbitrary phonetic schematic (the two need not be held simultaneously) but—and this is the most significant move—to reject the Cartesian self. In place of this self is not quite the Kantian subject either, although there is a meandering path back to Kant, a path on which Karl Marx is the gatekeeper. For the structuralist, the self is *constituted* by language; the self *is* language; the self is not an autonomous rational entity, but a linguistic construction. Consequently, the self that knows the world through language is itself the language that is that knowledge. The self is not that which employs language, as if language were its tool; language consti-

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tutes the user. Speaking of myth, Lévi-Strauss writes in the "Overture to *le Cru et le cuit*," "We are not claiming to show how men think the myths, but rather how the myths think themselves out in men and without men's knowledge."[4]

The step taken by *post*-structuralism is to argue that the accessibility of any reality external to the language which constitutes the self is undemonstrable. This pinpoints empiricism's geological fault. If asked what the signified is that is partnered with a certain signifier—a sound—all one can do is talk about it, explain it—which is to generate more sounds. But more sounds are more signifiers. All there is, then, from this view (which pries apart, despite Saussure, signifier and signified), are signifiers. Language is an interwoven chain of signifiers, internally self-referential (like the circularity of a dictionary). The "concept," the signified, is sabotaged. And if the self is constituted by such language, then, obviously, it cannot be the case that an external real world is accessible to a subject who lives in it yet is in some way distinct from it, an objective observer. Language, or text, is all that can be known, and it is itself the knowing. "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte," claims Derrida in *Of Grammatology*; there is no "outside-text."[5]

Language and Reality

Tallis objects to Derrida's assertion that "reading . . . cannot legitimately transcend the text toward something other than it" (a reality), because the assertion contains the unwarranted "invisible general principle" that "all autonomous systems are sealed off from whatever is outside of them" (18–19). There is a "fundamental difference between the system of language," which can be analyzed as an autonomous system, and its "particular use" (19), which logically can, and even must, refer to a real external world. The human nervous system, for example, can be analyzed as an autonomous system, yet its relation to an external world is, for Tallis, obvious. "No one is going to suggest," says Tallis, "that the events that take place in the brain do not give access to a common or public reality" (78).

While it is valid, Tallis continues, to claim that "the outside world is mediated to us via stories," via language, it is invalid to conclude that the "outside world *dissolves into* those stories" (46). Saussure did not intend to pied-piper us into this error; his theories were "non-revolutionary."

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> A good deal of carelessness is needed in order to secure the transition from Saussure's recognition of the systematic nature of language to the conclusion that language is a *closed* system; from the observation of the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign to the claim that true reference is not possible; or from the idea that linguistic meaning is carried through values that are essentially differential or negative to the now popular belief that meaning is an *effect* of language or that meanings carried by language are internal to the linguistic system. (68)

Tallis employs the *reductio ad absurdum*. Derridean assertions are self-contradictory. "If there is no outside of language, then there can be no position from which the role of language in 'constructing a world of individuals and things' can be viewed and described" (59). This is a telling objection, for it is quite right that describing the role of language requires a perspective, and a vocabulary, that can somehow encompass its subject, and therefore itself. This yields a conundrum. Even Derrida admits (as if honesty could be evidence) that his attack on the "logocentric" tradition can only be conducted from inside it, which is to undermine the premises that make the debate possible. This logical inversion is, however, the essence, not the inconsistency, of post-structuralism.

Some researchers, Tallis continues, note that the continuous spectrum of colors is segmented differently in various cultures, as if this might be proof that the reality we know is the language that generates it. Tallis asks: How can it be known that the names of colors are a partitioning of a *continuous* spectrum unless there is some underlying knowledge of an extra-linguistic reality, the continuous spectrum?

The purpose of language is, after all, communication, Tallis states; communication about the world, which has real divisions, prior to language. "If reality were undivided before linguistic segmentation, there would be no purpose in communication" (60). Admittedly, "language is one of the elements that contribute towards the constitution of reality." It is, however (and he disagrees with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, too) "not the only one" (64). While it is true that language is systematically constituted by vocable differences, "the negativity of the signifier and the signified," a "*positivity* results from their fusion in the realized linguistic sign" (69).

In a passage of the *Course* to which Tallis often, and for good reason, refers, Saussure asserts that "when we consider the sign in its own totality, we have something that is positive in its own class." Saussure proceeds, "Although both the signifier and the signified are purely differential and negative when considered separately, their combination

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is a positive fact." For Tallis, this positivity exists because the "sign as a whole" is put to use. Communication is what language is *for*. Language cannot be defined "in isolation from its actual use in specific situations, and without reference to extra-linguistic reality" (73). While it is true that "*the system*" has no referents, the use of the system unquestionably has referents (85)—the world out there.

Tallis's conclusion has already been mentioned. Humans need to make sense of the world. Language stabilizes and assists our organization of, our knowledge of the world. "It does not itself generate the meanings into which we find ourselves plunged" (102). An "adequate" philosophy of language need not "aim to correlate words with pre-existing natural kinds" (102) since words are not mirrors of things, nor one-to-one correspondences with them. Rather, "the senses of an object . . . are determined to a great extent extra-linguistically. But they are not fixed solely by physical properties" (108). It is not surprising that language does not "mirror" the world, for language is about "the *sense* the world makes to us." And Tallis concludes: "All of this should be sufficiently obvious" (116).

Language and Truth

Each of his positions Tallis defends at some length, with that stimulating logic we have come to expect from English philosophers who inherit the forthright and vigorous prose styles of Locke and Hume, of Russell and Broad and Ryle, and so many others whose admirable clarity is the very thing that allows debate and contention to be so stimulating. Of course, all this enviable clarity yields no more consensus than does the most vexatious and cumbersome prose of philosophers elsewhere; and it certainly cannot (and some say it is not supposed to) yield "truth." Issues are never resolved, only perpetually reopened.

In post-structuralism "truth" is viewed as a product, not a discovery, of the method that produces it. Method is rhetoric. In all registers of a language, whether poetry, or law, or science, rhetoric yields a constructed truth and coherence, easily exposed, dismantled, "deconstructed," for it ultimately rests, usually covertly, on some undemonstrable "transcendental" signified, an unsubstantiated first principle ("reality," for example, or "substance" or Locke's "experience" or "God") as if that might serve as an external pre-linguistic warrantee for and ground of the referentiality of a language system.

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Modern empiricism would itself, from this perspective, evidence that intertextuality is at work, for it is the method that generates not only the problems but the history of these problems. Simultaneously, some fundamentally unquestionable facts of the matter are posited, which for the empiricist are "sensation" and "perception." For example: "Truth is best seen as *emergent*," Tallis writes, "beginning with perception," as if what perception is, or what it provides, may be taken for granted, not as a dilemma. To posit sensation and perception is, obviously, to posit something sensed and perceived, a world. This does not solve the problem; it *is* the problem. For Tallis not to question what it is that activates the nervous system (his primary analogy) is to premise one's conclusions. Further, it avoids the issues of how the nervous system comes to know *itself* (from what vantage point?) and more importantly, what the self might be. For Derrida, who proclaims himself a "radical" empiricist, the practice of positing the unmediated pre-linguistic *immediacy* of sensation (a pillar of phenomenology, too) is a strategy, not a discovery.

The texts of empiricism are not, however, the only philosophical context. Post-structuralism emerged not from Saussurean theory alone, but within the context of Continental idealism and phenomenology, and from European Marxism. The methodological suppositions of phenomenology and Marxism, and their histories, are neglected by Tallis, although these comprise the most significant philosophical forum for a discussion of post-structuralism. Tallis reasserts a definition of language validated by a familiar empiricism. The approach is to treat the post-structuralist contention as if it had been proposed as an hypothesis within the Anglo-American tradition of empiricist analytic philosophy (in which, obviously, it cannot be made to fit). Tallis conducts the debate in those terms, which, of course, set the criteria for philosophical reasoning for most Anglo-Americans, for whom the offspring of phenomenology may seem arcane exercises of an apparently inexhaustible terminological mystification. Tallis, as an empiricist, cannot see why the post-structuralist fuss ever arose: some misguided writers were "bewitched" by the ludicrous theory (116), which he labels "laughable," "nonsense," "silly," "irresponsible," "besotted," "careless," "unforgivable," "absurd," "sloppy," and "muddled."

Tallis writes as if propositions, and even entire books, may be tested for truth-value regardless of the context that produces them, as if the presumptions long found productive at one level of discourse, scientific method, will work ubiquitously. (But even science, under the influence of Continental thought in small-particle physics, has accepted a structural theory: in "models," terms function within a system of notation—

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much like the terms of a poem functioned for the New Critics!—not as labels for unquestionable entities.) Tallis supposes that propositions ultimately refer to a real state of external affairs or to the sense of that state that might be shared by any clear-headed human anywhere. Denying this is, for Tallis, the structuralist blunder. But for Tallis to refer to a "common or public reality" (likely a misappropriation of the later Wittgenstein, here) is, in fact, to use "reality" in a way not incompatible with the linguistic "relativism" Tallis opposes. After all, what is "common or public" may be *caused* by a shared language, rather by an underlying, universally perceived "reality" reflected by that language. Post-structuralism seems misguided because Tallis takes as self-evident those familiar empiricist suppositions that two hundred years of at least one Western philosophical tradition has repeatedly found the need to explore, and not always in an unfriendly way, with some thoroughness. That so many writers are now responsive to this tradition, and not intimidated by theoretical borderguards and customs agents, is admirable.

Further, turning to a theory of "communication" allows Tallis to avoid calling into question the empiricist definition of the self or consciousness. One is familiar with communication diagrams: a sender and a receiver and a little arrow, which is the message, between them. What constitutes the sender and receiver is, however, a dilemma for many of us. Communication theorists accept the suppositions of an empiricist psychology, as if the methodology of that psychology is something more than hypotheses about behavior and thought generated by collations of external observation and introspective reports (themselves both determined by presumed "objective" criteria of what "counts")—which says nothing (although it casually assumes something) about the fundamental nature of selfhood. Attacks on structuralism have frequently insisted that structuralism accounts for the phonetic structure of language, but not for the *use* of that structure—for communication. Speech-act theory, that of J. L. Austin, is then proposed as a preferable analysis.[6] This is to miss structuralism's essential question: What is the constitution of the "self" that uses language? (Is "uses" the right word?) Communication theory is compatible with *any* answer to that question, which in part accounts for its popularity. In that respect it is similar to psychology: neither theory would need to be modified whether the self is language or soul, whether the mind is the brain or immaterial, whether there is innate knowledge or not, or whether, as the Hindus assert, Atman and Brahman are the same. Post-structuralism is often found preposterous because its conclusions are read as if—preposterously—they purport to

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be, or ought to be, derived from the customary empiricist predispositions of every Anglo-American discipline, whether of the academic researcher, or of the man in the street, who also shares the characteristic empiricist outlook (even our theory of democracy is traceable to Locke), which he calls common sense.

Language and Self

What summons the belligerence many commentators have towards post-structuralism is that it openly and intentionally threatens the notion of selfhood supporting the customary humanistic premises of political and ethical theory in Western civilization. The texts are often debated with an apocalyptic intensity. If the self is constituted by the language into which the biological organism is born, if language does not give direct access to reality, and if systems of discourse evolve in an autonomous way, then determinism, repugnant to the humanist, follows. The French post-structuralists attack, and apparently eliminate, what is most sacred to humanists, the vision of a self who knows the world with some objectivity, a self whose freedom of choice is founded on the potential of rationality to serve as mediator between desire and behavior. Such rationality underlies the concept of moral responsibility inherent in Western politics, jurisprudence, education, and religion. Furthermore, the subversion of that vision has occurred in an intellectually Marxist setting. Consequently, repelling the infiltration of Marxism into the capitalist stronghold, the haven of humanism and liberalism, is a predominant motivation for hostile critics.

Structuralism and post-structuralism cannot be understood without recognizing the influence of Marxism, which underlies the debate. In a number of places Karl Marx states that the *contents of consciousness* have external social causes, which he traces back ultimately to the economic system, the basic substructure from which emerge cultural superstructures, the institutions of family, religion, law, and education. Yet while the economic system serves as the fundamental determinant of institutions and the consciousness they generate, Marx believes that knowledge of this yields the possibility for humans to manage cultural evolution, as if we can encourage history to move more quickly in the direction it *must* go, paradoxically (a paradox issuing from Spinoza) overcoming the determinism that grounds the theory.

Marx predicted a necessary decline of capitalism, for reasons by now familiar. This seems not to be occurring. As a consequence Marx's

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economic speculations have often been played down in recent years, particularly the notion that the economic system of production is the unrivaled cause of all other social institutions. Recent Marxism proposes interacting domains of institutions, each having a history with some degree of autonomy.[7] Such histories are seen by structuralists as relatively autonomous, yet interlocking, language domains functioning as intertextual discourse.

Post-structuralism has been attacked by some Marxists as a lapse into deplorable idealism. They argue that if the self is constituted solely by language, then we are imprisoned in language,[8] just as to accept the Kantian categories means that invariable mental structures determine the possibility and form of knowledge, so that it is not possible to know the things of the world as they really are. Either Kantianism or post-structuralism would make an objective knowledge of history, presumed necessary by most Marxists, impossible. It is justifiable to view the structuralist project, particularly by the time it gets to Derrida, as having substituted language for the Kantian categories. If to a post-structuralist truth is a fabrication of rhetoric, a product of textuality (fabric, textile, text!), then even Marxism cannot be privileged as a discourse attaining to truth. It is important to understand, however, that this is *not* what the original structuralists intended to do: they believed they were elucidating, not distorting, the consequences of Marxism, which they favored. Derrida's post-structuralism, on the other hand, subverts the structuralism he extends; he means his writings to deconstruct idealism (and phenomenology) as well as empiricism, for the "subject" proposed by Kant is as much a coherent and autonomous entity as that proposed by Descartes. Some Marxists reject these later developments; others applaud them, recognizing that a structuralist linguistic theory allows an elaboration of the theory of political "ideology," since ideology, a form of language, functions to rationalize a social environment through a discourse that makes political and economic institutions seem parts of a *natural* state of affairs.

Furthermore, structuralism, as we find it originally in Lévi-Strauss, is basically, as Derrida notes, a purported empiricist exploration. Anthropology and linguistics are advanced through the procedures of scientific method, which Lockean empiricism validates. Derrida attempts to undo structuralism by breaking apart signifiers and signifieds so that we are left with only a chain of signifiers, only text, without demonstrable reference. Even scientific method is not immune. This rebuttal resembles, in places repeats, the critique of Locke's empiricism by Hume. From an empiricist point of view, Derrida is to early structuralism what

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Hume is to Locke. In the Anglo-American setting, post-structuralism is a resurgence of skepticism.

At the same time post-structuralism serves to rework the project of phenomenology by unraveling the concept of the Cartesian self. Post-structuralism ousted, and then superseded, the free Cartesian self championed by existentialism. Orthodox Marxist theory, ironically, had been an early patron of structuralism, because many Marxists had never been comfortable with the Cartesian underpinnings of phenomenology and existentialism (whether in Husserl or Sartre). But post-structuralism, having ousted the free Cartesian self, then threatened Marxism, too.

The ability of post-structuralism to assume roles in two distinct philosophical traditions, empiricism and idealism/phenomenology, is what is remarkable about it: especially because the two roles, oddly, are contrary to one another. In France, post-structuralism replaces the existentialist notion of the free self with a linguistic determinism. Yet in the Anglo-American environment, the renewed skepticism prompts a subversion, welcomed by humanists, of the deterministic implications of empiricism (which has a mechanistic epistemology) by questioning its basic assumptions about sensation and perception. Accordingly, post-structuralism simultaneously serves to fortify determinism in one setting and weaken it in another.

Tallis does not discuss these important genealogical matters. Marx is mentioned twice, in passing, in a derogatory way, and his name, like Kant's, is not found in the index. Lévi-Strauss is given a mention. In a brief review, Tallis locates the foundations of "modern structuralist poetics" in Mallarmé, in Surrealism, and, more remotely, in "the evaporation of religious belief" (4). Such an attribution omits, in my view, what would most clarify structuralism and post-structuralism for the Anglo-American community.

Tallis concedes that other recapitulations "equally plausible, equally sketchy could be confected" (8). The idea of history as confection would undoubtedly be most pleasant to those very theorists Tallis attacks, and "equally plausible" might, were one so inclined, invite some stimulating repartee.

Literary Reality

Tallis says that one of his major motivations is to defend the feasibility of "realistic" fiction, a fiction that does yield information about and insight into a real external world. The title of his book indicates that it is post-

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Saussurean "literary theory" he is attacking, although literary matters emerge only sporadically. Tallis's position is that if he can show that the post-structuralist belief that language gives no privileged access to an external reality is absurd, then realism in literature is thereby validated.

The usefulness of a critical method in literary studies is, however, assessed by its productivity. Determining this is not equivalent to assessing the validity of the reasoning, or the probable truth of the premises that underlie its method. Literary critics are often ignorant of the underlying philosophical suppositions of their method. This is not necessarily a problem. Although a practice assumes a philosophy, the practitioner need not know it. One may find the philosophical roots of a literary Romanticism in Kant's aesthetics, yet the literary movement called Romanticism is not accounted for by Kant's logic, since what accounts for that movement also determines the use Kant makes of logic. Literature is produced, published, distributed, at certain times for certain readers. Understanding the production of literature and its criticism requires an understanding of their consumption.

Realism's "realism" has little to do with whether—as Tallis believes—a literary work accurately reflects or portrays "reality." What determines the *apparent* verisimilitude is the context within which "realism" evolves as a literary technique and an acceptable critical assessment. "Realism" as a critical term (and even as an *apparent* achievement of the literature under scrutiny), then, depends only on the critical *assumption*—whether true or not, whether contemplated thoroughly or not—that language grants access to a "real" reality. Addressing the epistemological issue, as Tallis does, does not resolve the literary one.

Literary analysis requires conjectures about those who write and those who read. One wants to know in what way literature *is* meaningful to those who read it; why such meaning plays an important role for people and why these meanings and roles change over time. In what way does criticism add to that meaning, or generate it? What purpose does it all serve, and whose? Without assessing such purposes and procedures, which requires some historical astuteness and not simply the art of the "confectioner," an historical movement—or a literary one, like realism—remains obscure.

Attacking the Text

Tallis's seventy-page analysis of Derrida is frequently insightful, insofar as this entails the consistency in the application of his presuppositions

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which characterizes the book as a whole. This does not mitigate the fact that the entire attack can be understood as a reassertion of unchallenged classical empiricist principles, which Tallis believes any sane person would take for granted. Derrida, however, is directing his attention to a point in the philosophical debate that occurs *before* the place where Tallis starts out: the point at which certain assumptions concerning the possibility of defining and meeting conditions for "truth" that have originally motivated the entire program of Western philosophy were first introduced. Tallis, who already accepts that certain conditions for truth (like "perception") can be fulfilled, sees Derrida's issues as "merely the egregious problem of a small group of philosophers" (174).

Tallis's confidence that his premises are indisputable prompts him to conduct the discussion with an obvious hostility towards those theories, and their proponents, he hopes to dismiss or correct. He often misrepresents what he opposes, in order to mock it. For example, he argues that since a post-structuralist finds that any sequence of logic ultimately rests on insecure ground and can, consequently, be deconstructed, this is the same as being told it is "preferable to be illogical . . . anything goes" (175). He suggests that the way deconstruction works is to take any random inconsequential remark in a text and inflate "its significance out of all proportion" (170). Then he goes on to refer to the "seamless muddle" of Derrida's prose, and the "absurd confusion of levels" that leads to "baseless paradoxes." Derrida is "in some ways a tragic case." One quickly tastes the bitter flavor of this assault.

Moreover, the range of texts Tallis chooses to analyze as a body of representative post-Saussurean literature does not constitute a coherent "school" of thought. American deconstruction, for example, which Tallis apparently despises, is not strictly Derridean, as Derrida himself has commented. Geoffrey Hartman ("supreme master of an intellectually derelict mode of writing") actually proposes a "counter-statement" to Derrida, and reintroduces "representation" in language in the book Tallis uses as if it were a Derridean practical manual (*Saving the Text*; its dedication reads "For the subject"). Tallis mistakenly takes Harold Bloom's writings as if they were themselves "post-Saussurean" criticism and then refers to the "irresponsibility" of Bloom's scholarship. Bloom, though he wrote an essay included in a collection by various authors with "deconstruction" in the title, finds the structuralist method useless for his literary criticism, and he sometimes makes fun of it, even in the book Tallis cites. Jonathan Culler's well-known book, *Structuralist Poetics*, cannot represent structuralism: it does not end up defending the movement but substituting for it a theory of "the conventions of reading," another

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thing entirely. The favorable reviews of the movement by Catherine Belsey and by John Hawkes are just that, reviews—like Culler's, secondary texts. And six or seven citations of Tzvetan Todorov (all taken by Tallis from discussions of Todorov in a secondary source) cannot be isolated, piecemeal, from his own works or from the long line of the thinkers who make his intentions comprehensible. Lastly, there is a long section on Lacan's theory of the "mirror stage" of childhood, a theory which, while indisputably useful to the post-structuralists, was developed as a Freudian critique in the late forties. Besides, Lacan's disagreements with Derrida are well known.[9]

Tallis has done a worthwhile study. Your life will not go astray if you believe in his principles. Certain comfortable notions of what the human self is, of what language is, and of what reality is, have been placed in jeopardy and will need new champions. The threat—which is basically, I contend, a deep-seated Anglo-American aversion for French and German "meta"-physics and a fear of a revitalized Marxism—is apparently quite tormenting.

I am, however, concerned that intellectual movements as important (though perhaps already waning) as structuralism and post-structuralism have been received by so many as absurd, impudent, outlandish, incomprehensible, or threatening to every sane humanist and citizen, while others, even less forgivable, claim that these movements say nothing they did not already know. The apprehension, the dismay, the ignorance, and the apathy are equally uncalled for.

NOTES

1. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (London: Fontana, 1974). This is the version cited by Tallis. There is also a translation by Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, 1983).
2. Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" in Richard Macksey and Eugene Donato, eds., *The Structuralist Controversy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), 247–64.
3. Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1959). The work first appeared in 1949.
4. Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Overture to *le Cru et le cuit*" in Jacques Ehrmann, ed., *Structuralism* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor-Doubleday, 1970), 31–55.
5. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), 158.
6. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975).

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7. Issues important to recent Marxist thinking are addressed in the essays in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).
8. See Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).
9. The works to which I refer include Geoffrey Hartman, *Saving the Text: Literature/Derrida/Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981); Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety Of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977); Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (New York: Methuen, 1980); Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1981).

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Stephen Cox

DEVICES OF DECONSTRUCTION

THE TAIN OF THE MIRROR: DERRIDA AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF REFLECTION

by Rodolphe Gasché

Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986. 356 pp., $25.00, $12.95 (paper)

DERRIDA ON THE THRESHOLD OF SENSE

by John Llewelyn

New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986. 137 pp., $27.50, $10.95 (paper)

At issue are the ideas of Jacques Derrida, the leading exponent of "deconstruction"—a form of literary and philosophical analysis that, emanating from France during the last two decades, has exerted a major influence on American academic criticism. To "deconstruct" a literary or philosophical text is to reveal conflicting or incommensurable elements in the language that the text requires for its existence, to reveal the ways in which the terms and concepts that create its intellectual structure simultaneously undermine that structure.

Deconstruction is well adapted to the needs of intellectuals who have become disillusioned with orthodox Marxism and Freudianism but who are not prepared to abandon their chronic dissatisfaction with "Western humanism" or "bourgeois ideology." Deconstruction is purportedly able to demonstrate that all ideologies are without ultimate "ground" and that no text or system of ideas can "totalize" itself, in the sense of offering a complete or essential view of truth or even a coherent organi-

The author is Associate Professor of Literature at the University of California, San Diego, and the author of *"The Stranger Within Thee": Concepts of the Self in Late Eighteenth-Century Literature* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980).

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zation of determinate concepts. The deconstructive attack on totalization normally entails an attack on all those pretensions to objective understanding traditionally associated with the liberal study of philosophy and literature. Deconstruction has provided an important source of legitimation for anti-humanist and anti-liberal ideas.

Merely discussing deconstruction, let alone debating it, is an awkward task. It is difficult to paraphrase the deconstructionists without misrepresenting them, and it is difficult to say what mark they will leave on intellectual life. Because deconstruction attempts to display the "undecidability" of all texts, including its own, it is a discourse of great subtlety and complexity, replete with terms that translate badly into normal language. Because it usually proceeds by analyzing the ambiguities and paradoxical implications of particular words in particular texts, it is the kind of enterprise that interests literary critics more than philosophers—yet its concerns increasingly appear too narrow to sustain literary interest. It has little relevance to such traditional subjects of critical inquiry as the relation of text to authorial intention, of text to social history, or even of text to conscious philosophical speculation. Its maturity as a theoretical movement is limited by its programmatic attempt to avoid unambiguous theses or statements of purpose. This reticence has not prevented it from producing a flood of academic books, which typically take the form of commentaries: Gasché's book is a commentary on Derrida; it is also, in large part, a Derridean commentary on Hegel; Llewelyn's book is a commentary on certain aspects of Derrida's commentaries on Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, and others. One cannot tell for sure whether this industrious mining of texts is an indication that the Derridean vein is still rich with uncommentaried ideas or a warning that the vein is nearly exhausted.

But whether deconstruction has a future or not, the movement merits serious study. It can be truly, if ironically, said that the more one understands deconstruction, the more one understands language and logic. By examining Derridean methods, one can map a treacherous segment of the frontline between meaning and unmeaning, problem and pseudo-problem in literary and philosophical discourse. The present discussion is an essay toward mapping that segment. It is only secondarily a review of the two books listed in the heading, both of which are designed to demonstrate the power and cogency of deconstruction.[1] I will indicate what I think of these works, but my chief concern is with the Derridean method for which each book supplies a commentary and a polemic.

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A Is Not-A

The drawing of a map often begins with the location of some easily identifiable feature of a landscape. The shape of a foothill may be recorded before the shape of the mountain range that lies beyond it. I will begin with a simple illustration of Derridean method, as it appears in Llewelyn's book.

Llewelyn takes up the question of what constitutes genre—of what, for example, defines certain texts as "poems" rather than "novels" or "plays." His argument proceeds in a characteristically deconstructionist manner, addressing the literary problem as a special case of a larger philosophical problem. The problem involves our ability to assign individual objects to larger classes of objects. Llewelyn notes that objects are understood to possess features that identify them as part of one class or another. Rhyme, for instance, is a feature indicating that certain texts are poetry. "But this indicating, although it is an indicating of what . . . makes the text a poem, is not itself poetic. It is not a member of the class poetry even if it is an indicating of what makes a poem a member of that class." But isn't an indicating feature of poetry just a *property* of poetry? Maybe, but "it is not a simple property because in telling us that a certain string of words falls under the concept of poetry it at the very same time puts itself outside that concept's scope." On the one hand, rhyme or fixed line-length is a feature of poetry; on the other hand, it can't be *poetry*, because its function is to indicate or point to poetry. Therefore "the poem itself will have a part which is apart from itself, a part which is insideoutside. This means that the poem itself, by virtue of that part, will be insideoutside" (122).

The picture that Llewelyn creates is strange, but so are the images we use in thinking about "properties." We picture the distinctive properties of poetry as things stored inside it, like so many cardboard boxes packed in a garage; but we also picture properties as signposts that "tell us" where poetry is, as if they existed in some space exterior to poetry: they are outside on the lawn, pointing to the garage. Llewelyn's deconstruction exposes the quaint imagery that assists our logic. This quaintness, however, does not hinder us from making distinctions among various classes of objects—distinguishing verse from prose, for instance. If we have trouble doing so, it is generally because the features we treat as distinctive are the kind that can be stored in more than one conceptual garage. Our mental processes could, of course, become disturbingly paradoxical if we combined and reified our different mental images of an object's properties, treating properties as if they were spatial entities and

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describing them as simultaneously inside and outside the object. This is what Llewelyn does when he describes the properties of poetry as at once inside and outside of poetry, until it seems to him that poems themselves are at once inside and outside. He takes imagistic quaintness seriously and transforms it into a logical problem.

A more complex examination of insides and outsides appears in a passage of Gasché's book. Now we leave the foothills and approach the central massif of the Derridean theory of ideas—its account of conceptual oppositions.

Every concept, Gasché says, "is part of a conceptual binary opposition in which each term is believed to be simply exterior to the other. Yet the interval that separates each from its opposite and from what it is not also makes each concept what it is" (129). The idea that concepts are determined by what they are not recalls a principle of modern linguistics, according to which verbal signifiers are viewed as elements in a system of differences: the word "dog" conveys information because it is different from the word "panda" or "wolverine" or "manatee," not because "d-o-g" has some intrinsic relation to certain furry household pets. In Gasché's reference to binary oppositions there may also be a distant reminiscence of Aristotelian logic, in which A is *not* not-A.

Gasché's emphasis, however, falls on the "interval" metaphor: "A concept is thus constituted by an interval, by its difference from another concept. But this interval brings the concept into its own by simultaneously dividing it. . . . No concept . . . can be thought rigorously without including the trace of its difference from its Other within itself. Yet that is as much as to say that the concept—of ethics, for example, but all other concepts as well—includes within itself the trace of that to which it strives (teleologically) to oppose itself in simple and pure exteriority. As a result of this law constitutive of concepts, all concepts are in a sense paradoxical" (129; see also 187–88).

By this point, little remains of the conventional A/not-A distinction, and our normal idea of a distinction or "difference" has been transformed into something very different indeed. How is this transformation accomplished? The first, seemingly innocuous step, is the imagization of difference as a spatial "interval." The "interval" metaphor seems merely to illustrate the presence of a firm distinction between opposing concepts. The next step, however, is the reification of spatial imagery. Difference is now a thing that leaves a "trace" within the territory of opposing concepts; each concept now includes a trace of the other, and therefore is neither truly itself nor truly opposed to the other. The whole idea of the Other has become mysterious. It is not the commonsense *other*

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of phrases like "another concept." It is the *Other*, the uncanny kinsman, the Abel whose death is eternally marked in the flesh of the Cain who strove to be free from him. Because not-A is now pictured as at least partially inside A, the interval between them, with which we began, has been transformed into a paradox, and with it the basis of conceptual discrimination, opposition, and contradiction.

The Hypostatization of Imagery

No deconstructionist would take the absurd position that concepts actually have spatial dimensions; space and "the spatiality that informs the metaphor of structure" are themselves susceptible to deconstruction.[2] But Llewelyn suggests the importance of spatial imagery when he remarks that in "everything he deconstructs," Derrida exposes "an undecidability over what is inside and what is out" (xi). And it is difficult to understand how the deconstruction of traditional logic could proceed if it did not take the reification of spatial imagery seriously enough to use it as a basis of its own logic. One might argue that this usage effectively illustrates the deconstructionist contention that all discourse is deconstructible, even its own. It is really an illustration, however, of a special device of manipulation in deconstructionist discourse. Non-spatial translations of Gasché's "interval," "trace," "includes," "exteriority," etc., will not produce the deconstructive effect. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that I cannot think the concept "dog" without thinking the concept "not-dog." I am aware of a *distinction* between these concepts, and by the same token I am aware of a *relationship* between them. When I think of dogs I may at the same time think of pandas or wolverines, viewing these animals as objects that are different from dogs. None of this produces a paradox. No exterior intervals appear in order to be changed into interior divisions; no concepts are rendered innately self-contradictory; no dog is cursed with the trace of panda.

Of course, at different times I may entertain *different* views of the *same* object. Deconstruction attempts to depict this mental operation, too, as paradoxical. In this case, the deconstructive method is often to represent different views as simultaneous rather than sequential, so that they can be regarded as insidiously working to confound one another. Spatial imagery is a favorite device of detemporalization. An example can be found in a passage of Derrida's *Writing and Difference* that serves as authority for many deconstructionist arguments. Gasché employs it as

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substantiation for his argument about the paradoxical nature of conceptual oppositions. Derrida deconstructs the notion that structures of thought are grounded in—or "centered on"—principles that are closely related to them but that are regarded as firmer and more essential than the rest of the structures:

> It has always been thought that the center, which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality. This is why classical thought concerning structure could say that the center is, paradoxically, *within* the structure and *outside it*. The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality *has its center elsewhere*. The center is not the center.[3]

We know that conceptual "structures" have no spatial dimension except what out images seem to give them. Concepts are not over or under or outside or inside one another. What, then, does Derrida explain about concepts when he develops the possible ambiguities of metaphorical "centers"? The ambiguities are merely those of his imagery. When he speaks of a "structure" that has a "center," one thinks, very likely, of a circle; a circle is a structure "governed" by a center that is essential to it. But the circular structure may be variously viewed, for various analytical purposes, as circular outline; as outlined area; as outlined area minus center-point; as center-point, area, and outline; and so on. "Totality" 1 is not the same as "totality" 2, 3, or 4. This will appear paradoxical to people who confuse these different views of the circle with the circle itself. It will not appear paradoxical to observers who realize that the various "totalities" are nothing more than various sequential views or definitions, not simultaneous and opposing states of existence.

Let us use the notion of a center in thinking about, say, Bishop Berkeley's "structure" of thought. Berkeley "grounds" or "centers" his philosophy of human perception on a concept of the divine origin of perception. At certain times, and for certain purposes, we may consider Berkeley's theology and epistemology as constituting one structure, with theology at the center. At other times, we may consider the theological center as specially privileged and in this sense different from and "outside" the rest of Berkeley's philosophical structure. Again, no paradox need be implied. We know we are performing different analytical and imagistic operations at different times and need not marvel at the superficially opposing ways in which we use metaphors of structure.

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Contriving an Abyss

Discussing Derrida's critique of concepts associated with "temporality," Llewelyn pictures Derridean thought as operating "on the very threshold of conception, on the very threshold of sense" (118). Indeed, the Derridean game with thought often resembles a childlike playing on the doorstep of meaningful inquiry. Wishing to convict conventional processes of thought of a hopeless paradoxicality, Derrida pictures the structures they create as not including the bases *on* which they are based, the centers *on* which they are centered. If, then, the center is not where it should be, it must be "elsewhere"; the center of structure A (supposing that it has a center) must lie someplace in the Other, the not-A. When Rousseau or Hegel or any other philosopher imagines that he is arguing for A, his argument is paradoxically centered, if centered at all, on the not-A. Derridean conclusions on such matters are understood to have universal application. As Llewelyn points out, when Derrida finds fault with Rousseau's logic, "the fault is in logic," not just in Rousseau's use of it. "It is a structural fault" (98).

Despite all this destructuring, Derrida refers to deconstruction as "affirmative."[4] The statement is true, in a way. Deconstruction is creation, not just negation. It is a creation contrived by a wry, willful logic that, so far from deconstructing any previously known universe, is busy constructing (and, naturally, deconstructing) a wry, willful little universe of its own.

Spatialization, reification, and detemporalization are the major means by which Derrida constructs his logical universe. One of his speculations involves letters not arriving at their destinations: "A letter does *not always* arrive at its destination, and from the moment that this possibility belongs to its structure one can say that it never truly arrives, that when it does arrive its capacity not to arrive torments it with an internal drifting."[5] In the world of everyday life, the possibility that a letter may not reach its destination is an all too common practical problem, but not a logical one. Only if a letter could simultaneously arrive and not arrive would Aristotle tremble on his throne. In Derridean thought, however, the dimension of time loses the tyrannical power it exerts in the real world.[6] The possibility of a letter's non-arrival—a concept of what *might at some time* happen—is reified and spatialized as if it were an "internal" property of the letter itself.

The world of the Derridean letter, which is as remote from our world as is any universe of science fiction, aspires to challenge real-world processes of thought. The letter that *arrives* and yet *never truly arrives* is

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supposed to exemplify a necessary contradiction in those processes. Llewelyn depicts Derrida as an open-eyed innocent who happens to be "struck," time and time again, by the way in which normal logic reveals its lack of logic (88). But Derrida's speculation about the letter is perhaps more childish than childlike. The problem is not Derrida's simple use of a spatial metaphor ("internal drifting"). Virtually all philosophical speculation employs the mirror language of metaphor, and as the Derrideans remind us, the word "speculate" is a relative of the word "speculum" ("mirror"). No, Derrida's argument is childish because it confuses the mirror world of its linguistic creation with the world of temporal action to which the Derridean mirror adverts in its aloof and wayward way.

This childishness with mirrors seems especially unfortunate when one reflects (so to speak) on Derrida's ambition to deconstruct all mirrors. He by no means wishes to rest with speculative metaphors. He wishes to explore the conditions under which the strange and strangely fallible process of speculation takes place, to pull apart the mirror and reveal its *tain*, the lusterless and forgotten back of the mirror that allows reflection to occur (Gasché, 6). When Derrida speculates about the various things that may possibly happen to letters, he does so in order to ruminate about the unthought structures of thought that allow us to regard a letter or a psychological condition or a philosophical speculation as an uncontradictory, un-"fragmented" object.[7] But every underlying structure, once raised to awareness and actually *thought*, bears the trace of another underlying structure that makes *it* capable of being thought, and so on to seeming infinity. Even "infinity" is subject to deconstruction as a concept dependent on some condition that lurks behind it like the back of a mirror. A final conceptual "grounding" or "totalization" seems impossible, because behind—or "within"—every concept that is being thought there remains some unthought condition.

The road of infinite regress may be opened by either naive or profound questions, and sometimes there is little apparent difference between them. A child in Sunday school may ask, "If God created the universe, then who created God?" Gasché and Derrida respond to Hegelian ideas about absolute reflection by asking, "What makes it possible to think this ultimate and absolute? And what makes *that* possible?" These questions are not dissimilar in form to the child's question, and the fact that infinite regress is never hard to come by does not make the questioners ridiculous. Of such child's play, perhaps, is the kingdom of heaven. Deconstruction appears most plausible when it reminds us of problems that may beset attempts to speculate about ultimate metaphys-

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ical conditions. If this is what it means for Derrideans to "deconstruct metaphysics," then Derridean thought may have a real-world function.

The bounds of plausibility are exceeded, however, when infinite regress is created by treating the means and objects of thought as if they were detemporalized existences that must simultaneously include within themselves all possibilities and conditions with which they may at any time be associated. Suppose you assert that "there is no God." I deconstruct your language by observing that it includes, as one of its conditions, the concept of God that you wish to deny. "Very well," you say, "there is a God." But this invites me to observe that there can be no concept of God without a concept of not-God. The possibility of forming one concept is a condition of forming the other; each bears the trace of the other within itself.

"Nonsense," you reply. "Aren't *your* affirmative statements about 'traces' and so forth subject to the same deconstructive processes as my statements are? I mean, doesn't the idea of a 'trace' bear within it the trace of all the possible conditions in which it may become involved, including the possibility of its own deconstruction?" "Right!" I answer. "That's the point. All concepts and conditions implicate an endless chain of concepts and conditions. Deconstruction advances no theses (Llewelyn, 46-47). Instead, it traces—pun intended—the seemingly infinite conditions and implications of any word or concept, finding names for all the 'infrastructures' that lie beneath, behind and beyond them, infrastructures so subtle, so far receded into the abyss of conditions that they '*do not exist*' (Gasché, 276). While following this trace, Derrida is just as willing to explore the opposing and receding conditions embedded in his own discourse as he is to explore those embedded in Hegel's, or yours."

The "Rigor" of Reification

Deconstructionist polemics often insist upon the method's "rigor" (Gasché, 123-24, 154, 168-69, 176, etc.). The claim is typically based on deconstruction's dogged pursuit of the "undecidable" in every sort of language, including deconstructionist language, and on its conscientious refusal to propose some final response to all linguistic and conceptual difficulties. In this way, it is said, deconstruction differs from skepticism, which arraigns and dismisses concepts rather than incorporating them within its own system, and preserving them in their "undecidability." Deconstruction does resemble skepticism less closely than it resembles

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gnosticism or Manicheanism, with their immense proliferation of progressively more attenuated "explanatory" ideas expressed in reified spatial imagery. The effect of these systems, like that of deconstruction, is an imagistic transformation of reality.

Whether by design or by accident of speculative exuberance, the Derridean transformation of concepts extends to the transformation of things. Gasché informs us that deconstruction's philosophy of traces and differences is relevant to "any difference or opposition between terms, concepts, things, and so on" (188). Reading these words, one recalls Derrida's treatment of the arriving and not arriving letter. Is it just the *concept* of the letter that in some way both arrives and does not arrive, or is it also the *letter* that executes this difficult feat? Surely it is the letter as well as the concept that forms and is transformed in the Derridean mirror. Derrida uses the letter to discuss various other messages, such as philosophical theories, that arrive and not-arrive. Yet it is not just the concept of these messages but the messages themselves that Derrida "interrogates" and converts. Conceptual analysis can go no further than to remake the very things to which its concept-words refer. Still more remarkable is the fact that this effect is produced by a method that purports to question the referentiality of words and concepts. Clearly the imaginative effect of rhetoric is here preferred to any degree of philosophical rigor.[8]

Derrideans may object that some degree of imagistic transformation is inseparable from any philosophic method, since no discourse can function for long without images. The most penetrating recent study of spatial metaphors and their ideological and practical entailments supports this assertion. It strongly (I think far too strongly) emphasizes the non-objective aspects of reasoning and argues that "most of our fundamental concepts are organized in terms of one or more spatialization metaphors." Yet although it criticizes objectivism, it stresses the fact that "spatialization metaphors are rooted in physical and cultural experience" and serve as vehicles of conceptual understanding only by virtue of their basis in experience. It observes, further, that spatial metaphors are useful because they help us to understand vague or abstract concepts in terms of concepts that are clearer in our experience.[9]

Derridean metaphors stand this relationship on its head. They operate to deny the claims of experience and to transform simplicity into paradox and abstraction. This is a patently artificial performance. Just as we are unlikely to mistake a mime's self-conscious artistry for a plausible argument against our ability to speak,[10] so we are unlikely, once we

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discover the artificiality of the Derridean method, to find in it a plausible argument for the referential inadequacy of language.

To What Is Deconstruction Relevant?

I am hardly the first person to claim that deconstruction is more an artistic than a philosophical manifestation, though this claim usually takes the form of an argument that deconstruction is nothing but a verbal game. Of course, deconstruction is a highly linguistic enterprise. It is heavily committed to textual commentary, and it focuses on the play of differences among textual signifiers while refusing to acknowledge their determinate relationship to the objects, facts, or philosophical principles they are popularly supposed to signify. Derrida frequently turns his discourse into a rhapsody of word-plays, as if he operated on the principle that any verbal connection must constitute a philosophical connection. But the charge of simple game-playing is unfair. Derrida's linguistic displays would be pointless, even from his perspective, if they were not part of a campaign to undermine the received view of concepts as self-identical and properly exclusive of contradictions, replacing it with more exotic views.

It may be doubted if this activity will produce any beneficial mutations of political, social, or ethical concepts. Adherents allege that Derrida's textual experiments are part of a "general movement in the humanities of our century, responding in protest to the ideological constraints of a civilization that seems bent on self-destruction. The imperative for many cultural agents in the era of concentration camps and nuclear weapons has been to think 'otherwise,' to transgress the coherent unity of a metaphysics that has proven inadequate to the problems we face."[11] Deconstruction has been welcomed as an ally by some Marxists and feminists and supporters of third-world causes, as if it confirmed their intuitions about the corruptions of liberal humanism.[12] But nothing has established the adequacy or even the relevance of deconstructive logic to the social problems to which humanistic thought has so far "proven inadequate"—proven inadequate, perhaps, because tyrants and aggressors and cultural suicides have not been sufficiently constrained by humanistic ethics or even by normal logic. Indeed, they have chosen to "think otherwise," like the deconstructionists. In the Derridean context, "thinking otherwise" means *not* thinking clearly about the close connection of ideas to empirical reality. What remedy could this "thinking otherwise" hold for such empirical realities as tyranny and war?

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Deconstruction is dubious philosophy and still more dubious social action. It may be a species of poetry—one crude definition of which might be the imaginative reordering of concepts through the manipulation of verbal pictures. If this is true, is there a chance that deconstruction may have some special relevance to the study of other types of imaginative literature? Here we must proceed carefully. Gasché observes that literary critics who have attempted to apply Derridean principles have often "chosen simply to ignore the profoundly philosophical thrust of Derridean thought, and have consequently misconstrued what deconstruction consists of and what it seeks to achieve" (3). He is right. Although deconstruction has propagated its vocabulary very widely among literary critics, it is not to be misunderstood as just one more method of studying literature. Some reasons for this will emerge shortly. First let us see, however, if there is anything to be learned by a simple comparison of the devices employed by deconstructionist texts and the devices employed by other literary texts.

I have in mind something very basic. I am thinking of the device of paradox, which is heavily exploited both by Derrideans and by mystic or visionary poets, for the same general purpose of contesting normal ways of viewing relationships among concepts. Derrideans are sometimes shy about attaching the label of "paradox" to their literary devices. Nevertheless, the seemingly contradictory spatial images that I have been discussing are quite recognizably paradoxes, and at first glance they may appear very similar to the paradoxes in more traditional poetry.

One example is Emerson's poem *Worship*, an extended paradox that concludes in this way:

> He is the oldest, and best known,
> More near than aught thou call'st thy own,
> Yet greeted in another's eyes,
> Disconcerts with glad surprise.
> This is Jove, who, deaf to prayers,
> Floods with blessings unawares.
> Draw, if thou canst, the mystic line,
> Severing rightly his from thine,
> Which is human, which divine.[13]

If one wished to employ deconstructive methods to analyze the last three lines, the doctrinal summation of the poem, one could say that these lines problematize the interval between the opposing concepts of human and divine and place in question the privileged concept of "right" logical thinking. "Right" lines are also "mystic" lines, and it is impos-

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sible to draw these lines because "human" and "divine," antithetical and yet inseparable terms, exist in an undecidable relationship to each other and are, therefore, themselves as undecidable as the line-drawing logic that would separate them. In deconstructing these terms, Emerson's poem obviously deconstructs the very concepts on which its discourse is based; it deconstructs itself. Or does it? Emerson's text does not contest the notion that the words "human" and "divine," "right" and "mystic," have definite meaning, and it does not make them deconstruct themselves by including the traces of their antitheses. It suggests that the human and the divine are hard to sever because they are closely related, and that for this reason the line between them may appear mystically obscure. No deep conceptual problem here, only a slight conceptual surprise or disgust for readers who have formed their concept of the divine by opposition to their concept of the human.

A paradox works by conquering some conceptual resistance; anthropologists do not speak to one another in paradoxes when they say that the line severing man from animal is difficult to draw. Readers who already accept the idea that the human is in some respects the divine may not regard Emerson's poem as paradoxical. In any event, the Emersonian difficulty of drawing a line between man and God does not obscure the lines of traditional logic, unless one reads the poem as arguing for what it straightforwardly argues against and deconstructs—the idea that the human and the divine are contradictory. The poem deconstructs one type of boundary between two concepts, but it also suggests a boundary to deconstruction. It does not deconstruct logic; it deconstructs a specific conceptual opposition.

Sometimes we find in visionary literature a type of paradox that seems much closer to the deconstructive model. An instance appears in the second section of Yeats's poem *Vacillation*, where Yeats's speaker envisions a tree that is half foliage, half flame: "And half is half and yet is all the scene."[14] Let's assume that this is not just a paradox of perspective, an image of a tree that from one viewpoint seems fully involved in flame and from another viewpoint seems fully alive with leaves. Let's assume that each "half" is seen as "all" at one time and from one perspective. Now the image has the appearance of a spatialized self-contradiction of the kind that Derrideans construct in order to deconstruct.

But no one, I believe, will accept Yeatsian paradox as even roughly similar in effect to Derridean paradox. Yeatsian paradox does not spread. It is confined within a certain range of meaning and reference. It does not render its own language unreadable or undecidable. The image of the tree is placed in a context of allusions to spiritual experience of

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several kinds. It is about a kind of spiritual experience. It is not about certain other things. Certain meanings are excluded. Do you doubt that they can be excluded? Then look up the poem and try reading it, naively, as a work that is *about*, among other things, arithmetic and botany and the possibility that spiritual experience is actually a special kind of interest in arithmetic and botany. The poem cannot be read in this way; if all possible meanings must be included, no meaningful reading can take place.

The Possibility Explosion

But Derridean paradox depends on the attempt to include every possibility of meaning and every possible variation of imagistic "play" within a given understanding of an object or concept. What is "*always possible*," Gasché says, is "a necessary possibility that has to be accounted for" (9; see also 213). The Derridean letter both arrived and not-arrived because it was *possible* for it to do these things. Because Derridean paradox derives from the possibility rule, it arrives immediately at the boundary, not of deconstruction, but of "sense," from which position it announces that all texts are "undecidable" and "unreadable," including its own texts.

One of Derrida's clearest commentators explains the sources of Derridean freedom with texts when he says that "while it is true that a sender can communicate an intended meaning successfully to a specified receiver, it is equally true not only that messages may be misunderstood, but that meaning may arise in the absence of any message. Writing may serve as a vehicle for transporting a content of ideas, but this aspect does not exhaust the event of sense. Derrida entertains a theory of writing that reassesses certain elements of discourse that until now have been treated as dysfunctions and aberrations."[15] Is it being too obvious to remark that what is happening here is merely a creative redefinition of "nonsense" and "interpretive license" as literary "sense"? Gasché remarks that deconstruction is not "strictly speaking . . . a literary undertaking," perhaps because, as he also observes, its challenge to determinate meanings is a challenge to "thought," or at least to what is normally thought of as thought: "namely the thinking not only of something specific but of *one* determined thing, of a thing in its Oneness" (99–100). "Time was," says Hegel, "when the bare possibility of imagining something differently was sufficient to refute an idea, and this bare possibility, this general thought, also had the entire positive value of an

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actual cognition.''[16] But Gasché asserts that, viewed from a traditional perspective, Derridean thinking ''does not think anything at all'' (100).

In its tendency to spread from a critique of specific texts to a critique of all determinate thought, deconstruction resembles the metastasis of a cancer. When the conceptual cancer has reduced all resistance to itself, it of course destroys the resistance necessary for effective paradox. It drains its own life. But my image of a cancerous growth is wrong, because it seems to argue for the eradication of Derridean thought. That is not the argument I want to make, if only because there is a uniquely imaginative quality in the Derrideans' creation of an ideological world that hangs like a strangely colored parasite from the real world of human concerns. (A pride in ''parasitic'' commentary is much in vogue among the Derrideans.) No one who loved the imagination would want utterly to exterminate so curious a creature, a creature that may enjoy only a brief life-span anyway. If deconstruction goes the way of all academic fads, as I expect it to do, then we may have to form a charitable organization and establish special academic reserves for its protection. (Perhaps the tenure system will take care of this for us.) The argument that I want to make is that the dependence of Derridean thought on its rule of possibility means that deconstruction has little to offer literary theory or criticism, beyond the valuable warning example of its own procedures.

Gasché identifies the key Derridean contribution to literary-theoretical endeavors as the notion of ''the general text.'' This ''text'' is not a collection of words but a concept or a condition (or the concept of a condition). To imagine what the general text is, first think of an everyday sort of text like *Vacillation*. Commonsense people think of such texts as referring to or signifying something outside themselves—theological problems or Grecian urns or albatrosses or the people whom Alexander Pope didn't like. They may think of texts as having (as Gasché puts it) a signifying ''inside'' that is separated from a signified ''outside''; if pressed, they may even be made to think of the separation as some kind of interval or border. Gasché likens the general text, however, to the border itself, the location ''from which the assignment of insides and outsides takes place, as well as where this distinction ultimately collapses'' (280). The spatial metaphor of the ''border'' helps one to visualize the concept that Gasché is working on and perhaps, therefore, to take it seriously. But why should distinctions of inside and outside collapse at their border? Because, essentially, of the infinite regress of possible reference.

Although everyday texts are thought to signify something definite outside themselves, ''it may also be that their meaning cannot be

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exhausted in such a manner. If that possibility exists at all, however, it must be accounted for. The notion of the general text is nothing other than a philosophical 'construct' which gives that essential possibility its full importance" (282). This appears to mean that if there is any possibility (as there surely is) that the meaning *inside* the poetic text "Ding, Dong, the Witch Is Dead" is not exhausted by its reference to such *outside* things as witches, bells, childish aspirations for revenge, and so on, then that possibility must be "accounted for" by means of the concept of a more general text that includes the idea of unexhausted possibilities. But, very possibly, the meaning of the general text cannot be exhausted—and surely *this* possibility must be accounted for and included within the construct of the general text. Infinite regress becomes a distinct possibility. That is why Gasché says that the "referentiality" of the general text "is such that it extends abysmally out of sight" (282).

It is hard to imagine how this helps us to "account for" (explain? interpret?) anything, hard to see what the philosophical status of the general text could be, and harder still to conceive of the way in which the creation of an endlessly growing list of possibilities could have anything to do with the understanding or evaluation of literary texts, which in order to express particular meanings, even effectively paradoxical meanings, must not be a matter of endless possibilities.

I think that Gasché understands this, although he apparently thinks that it reflects worse on literary criticism than on deconstruction. There is one possibility that he would rather not pursue, the possibility that meaning can be limited: "Since all literary criticism hinges on the possibility of decidability with respect to an extra-or intra-text, the notion of the general text ruins the very project of that discipline." Gasché chooses words with care, and his word is *ruins*. Deconstruction is not, then, a game for literary critics; it's the destruction of criticism. But Gasché also thinks that "the notion of the general text opens a horizon of new possibilities in literary studies" (282). This horizon remains very cloudy to me. How are literary studies to use the notion of the general text? What does it have to teach? Gasché addresses such questions in a brief and oblique way. Literary folk who want to adopt the general text as "an operative concept" must recognize in it "a condition of possibility for phenomena" that is "also their condition of impossibility" (293). This seems a mere reiteration of paradox. But perhaps Gasché is calling us to investigate the way in which specific literary texts arise out of the "condition" of the general text. Perhaps he is calling for a new kind of linguistic history or conceptual archaeology. He speaks of "an explora-

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tion of ground structures which account for the phenomenon of language" (302). But "account for" in this instance seems a peculiarly empty phrase, because Gasché denies that the general text "engenders or constitutes that which it is the margin of, texts and textuality. One cannot even contend rigorously that it is a relation of conditions of possibility" (288). Something that does and is so little leaves precious little for one to do *with* it.

Although deconstructionists are devoted analysts of the details of other people's texts, their great task is to fit these textual specifics into the abstract system of the "general text"—letting the blood out of a work of literature very, very slowly and then, sometimes, adorning the corpse with gay plays upon words or attempting to reanimate it with the electric shock of bizarre literary procedures. Derrida's *Glas (Knell)*, his most distinctive work, is a monster of literary ingenuity. It consists of words arranged in two columns. One column contains quotations from Hegel and remarks on them and on possibly related matters; the other column contains quotations from Jean Genet and remarks on them and on possibly related matters; throughout, the language of systematic philosophy confronts, contests, and conjoins itself with the language of literary decadence, creating the madly mixed and amorphous textual space that Derrida in his works on other authors is presumed to be studying.

The Argot of "Theory"

No argument is needed to show that Derrida's literary *approach* can be highly inventive. Unfortunately, in the space available to me (and in English), I cannot conduct an adequate analysis of his *style*. It has been much appreciated and much disparaged by other scholars. Special praise is often given to his imagery—and brilliant imagery does appear in Derrida's volumes, though it is unevenly distributed. Much of *Writing and Difference*, for example, is cramped and dry, but the meditations on "the question of the book" in sections 3 and 11 are richly evocative. In *Spurs*, Derrida's essay on Nietzsche's styles, there is a most ingenious development of metaphor, culminating in the image of a folded and unfolded umbrella that suggests the endless openings and closings, the seemingly endless possibilities of the text. It is regrettable, considering what Derrida *can* do as a stylist, that he is so often afflicted by what he has called "terminological luxury or rapture."[17] Alexander Nehamas, who is a moderate appreciator of Derrida's style, says that Derrida "writes seductively, playfully, hauntingly."[18] One wonders, however,

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what standard of comparison is being employed. Does anybody outside the deconstructionist movement think that Derrida's prose is seductive in the way in which Hume's is seductive, or playful in the way in which Wilde's is playful, or haunting in the way in which Nietzsche's or St. Paul's or even Matthew Arnold's is haunting? I suspect not.

But about the style of Derrida's followers (with some few exceptions: e.g., J. Hillis Miller), there can be no doubt: it is gruesomely inartistic. Deconstructive prose is an astonishing exhibition of coyly "technical" nouns and adjectives, falsely dramatic verbs, and sentences that have lost track of their insides. Here is Llewelyn discussing "the fixing of *between*":

> The purely syntactic between is not sufficiently taxic. It is too slow for words. It gets overtaken by the semantic. To its syncategorematic function categorematic meanings accrue. . . . When it comes, instead of hymen, to be a count noun it suffers the fate of Kant's schema when this, instead of being what Starobinski's *processus* is supposed to mark, the middle-voiced function performed by the productive imagination, it sediments into a part-sensory, part-conceptual quasi-image, no longer an enigma. (116)

These salt-flats of abstraction inspire one with a new respect for all the beautiful specifics of culture, specifics of which deconstruction takes notice only while trying to shove them into its theory. They inspire respect for charm and pathos and genuine wit, for the touching ironies of the third movement of Mahler's First Symphony, for the perfect little Liotard portrait of a lady in the Detroit Institute of Arts, for the wise saying of Montaigne about the barren quibbling with which philosophy is disgraced: "Who has masked her with this false face, pale and hideous? There is nothing more gay, more lusty, more sprightly, and I might almost say more frolicsome. She preaches nothing but merrymaking and a good time."[19] If true philosophy is what helps us to live frankly and joyfully in an authentic world, then deconstruction has, by accident, the effect of true philosophy: it makes us remember how much we lose in a life of abstract "thought."

In the long run, most intellectuals will undoubtedly prefer Mahler, Liotard, and Montaigne to Derrida and his disciples. Meanwhile, however, deconstructionist polemics abound, and it has become necessary for a generation of doctoral students to learn at least the "technical" language of those polemics. The academic prominence of such a dry and unpromising method ought to be (in the now hackneyed phrase) accounted for. What does this say about contemporary academic life? It

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testifies, I think, to the continued influence of three familiar modes of intellectual displacement.[20]

The first is a displacement of scientific endeavor. Many literary intellectuals are still reenacting the trauma of eighteenth-and nineteenth-century conflicts between science and the humanities. Suspicious of empirical methods, skeptical about science's claims to progressive understanding of the world, they attribute the doubts and disasters of the modern age to the defects of objective reason and quarrel with the logic on which even their own disciplines have traditionally based themselves. But because these intellectuals are conditioned by an era that values progress and by academic institutions that reward "research," their reactionary skepticism expresses itself in a constant production of evermore "advanced" theories about civilization's chronic mental illnesses.

The second is a displacement of theology. When theology was considered the source of total understanding, a speculative reinterpretation of some passage of canonical literature might seem to entail an advance in understanding of the whole universe of discourse. Modern academics may scorn theology, but they manage to adapt its claims to their own needs. Thus Gasché, who gives canonical status to certain parts of Hegel's philosophy (e.g., 64), assumes that an analysis that purports to deconstruct this philosophy must result in a new and better understanding of all thought.

The third is a displacement of politics. Academic theorists spend vastly more time discovering political implications in literary texts than engaging in political activity. No doubt this is as it should be, though it suggests that the adage "Knowledge is power" ought to be revised to "Knowledge is the surrogate of power." The quest for political mastery is displaced into a quest for the mastery of abstract ideas—and the ability to master is understood, often enough, as the ability to destroy. In this century's intellectual arms race, many ideological weapons of mastery have been tested, and, as if by inevitable process of experiment, a weapon considered capable of universal destruction has been forged. This is the deconstructionists' law of possibility: every concept or text may incorporate, include, or "be inscribed with" every meaning or condition that one can possibly imagine, no matter how self-contradictory or absurd the inscription may be. With this simple weapon, one can master any intellectual opposition.

Or seem to master it. My speculations about the context of deconstruction's momentary prominence cannot disguise the fact that the deconstructive weapon is merely an artificial and imaginary threat.

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What is impressive is the deconstructionists' ability to get so far with so little real show of intellectual force.

NOTES

1. Although, as Llewelyn points out (89), many Derridean procedures are susceptible of other names than "deconstruction," I use the term as a convenient synonym for "Derridean method" or "Derridean ideology" as a whole.
2. Gasché, 145–46; see also Derrida's influential, and highly perceptive, essay on structuralism, "Force and Signification," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 3–30—an essay that contains some remarkable spatial metaphors.
3. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 279. Quoted by Gasché, 129.
4. Derrida, *Éperons [Spurs]: Les Styles de Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 36.
5. Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 489. Compare Llewelyn's translation: "The fact that it is capable of not arriving afflicts it with an internal misdirection (*la tourmente d'une dérive interne*)" (65).
6. In "But Are Things as We Think They Are?", *Times Literary Supplement*, October 9–15, 1987: 1104, Derrida's ally J. Hillis Miller asserts that "there is no such thing as an 'experience of being in the world and in time' prior to language. . . . Cosmological time arises through the [linguistic] act of dating." Of course, this makes language the tyrant—but does Miller think that nonverbal animals escape the experience of time?
7. Derrida, *The Post Card*, 444.
8. For other effects of imaginative rhetoric, see Derrida's transformation of God into an allotter of "secondarity" (*Writing and Difference*, 11), Gasché's transformation of death into a "condition of iterability," and his transformation of deconstruction itself into a peculiar kind of "empiricism" (Gasché, 214, 170). Gasché denies that such procedures represent "merely a metaphorical manner of speaking" (214).
9. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 17, 18, 115. See also 56–60, 176–77.
10. On Derrida as mime, see Gregory L. Ulmer, "Sounding the Unconscious," in John P. Leavey, Jr., *GLASsary* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 95.
11. Ulmer, 27.
12. A representative leftist exposition of deconstruction is Michael Ryan's *Marxism and Deconstruction: A Critical Articulation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982). For further discussion of the political implications

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of deconstruction, see Stephen Cox, "Literary Theory: Liberal and Otherwise," *Humane Studies Review* 5, no. 1 (Fall 1987): 1–14.

13. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Worship*, in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Centenary Edition), 12 vols., ed. Edward Waldo Emerson (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1903–04), vol. 6, 199.
14. William Butler Yeats, *Vacillation*, in *W. B. Yeats: The Poems: A New Edition*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Macmillan, 1983), 250.
15. Ulmer, 25.
16. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 9 (preface, par. 16).
17. Derrida, "The Law of Genre," trans. Avital Ronell, *Glyph* 7 (1980): 206.
18. Nehamas, "Truth and Consequences," *The New Republic*, October 5, 1987: 36.
19. Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, "Of the Education of Children," in *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 118.
20. For additional discussion of the cultural context of recent movements in the academy, see the valuable works of Gerald Graff, *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); and Frederick Crews, *Skeptical Engagements* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

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Rafe Champion

TOWARD CONSTRUCTIVE DECONSTRUCTION

BEYOND DECONSTRUCTION: THE USES AND ABUSES OF LITERARY THEORY

by Howard Felperin

New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. 226 pp., $13.95 (paper)

The deconstructionist movement has been widely perceived as a threat to the individualistic tradition, forming a "second front" alongside the ideas which challenge liberal individualism in philosophy and politics which were described in an earlier issue of this journal by Dennis Auerbach.[1] Indeed the intellectual ancestry of both movements can be traced back to writers such as Marx and Nietzsche.

Auerbach's views have aroused strong reaction from liberals[2] (as have those of the deconstructionists), and the nature of the resulting debate shows that it is important to decide which parts of the liberal tradition need to be defended or indeed can be defended. Without claiming that these exhaust the liberal program, two principles seem to be essential. First, the political program of protecting the freedoms of individuals from various forms of power, including the naked physical force which the strong and the armed can wield against the weak and unarmed, and from the political power and influence of rulers at all levels of government. Second, the methodological principle of individualism, which maintains that it is individuals and not collectives who think, feel, live, love, suffer, deliberate and make decisions. (This does not deny the fact that we find ourselves in situations that are not of our own making, that we act under the influence of many traditions of which we are unaware, and that our actions usually produce unintended consequences.)

The author is an Australian writer and researcher.

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As Auerbach argues, these essential liberal positions can be maintained without need of the claim that individuals have some kind of ontological priority over groups or societies, or the notion that the sovereign individual is a locus of authority on matters of fact or value, and without need of the theory of rationality which Hayek has criticized under the label of "constructivist rationalism." Indeed that appears to be the form of rationality that is under attack from followers of Marx and Nietzsche.

In attacking such rationality, the deconstructionists have adroitly located the weak point of Western philosophy. This is the problem of establishing firm foundations for rational or justified beliefs. More precisely it is the problem of working out where to stop when a critic persists in asking for a statement to justify the previous statement that was offered in support of a position. This formulation of the problem of rational belief can be traced back to the ancient skeptics, among whom Sextus Empiricus's work provides the first motto in Howard Felperin's *Beyond Deconstruction*. What deconstructionists have not done, however, is to pursue the kind of response to this problem suggested by W. W. Bartley, III's work on the limits of criticism and the ecology of rationality. Following Bartley it can be argued that the deconstructionists proceed from a correct premise (there are no authorities to justify the foundations of belief) to a false conclusion (there is no way to form a tentative critical preference for one theory rather than another).

The Philosophy of Literature

To evaluate this claim it is necessary to examine some of the main schools of thought in literary theory and the problems that they address. Three "perennial problems" can be located in the theory of criticism.

First, with regard to describing a literary work: can a text be described as the intentional product of a creative individual, or is it better seen as a product of social, historical, linguistic or some other non-individual determinants?

Second, regarding critical evaluation: can a text be evaluated as an autonomous object with a set of distinctly literary qualities, or should its value be based on the quality of "expression" of the writer, the nature of the response aroused in the reader, or the moral or ideological principles that it embodies?

Third, in the matter of reconciling rival points of view: can we ever hope to approach some consensus in our descriptions and evaluations?

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Or does the richness and complexity of literary texts generate an infinity of interpretations which defy any claim that some descriptions and evaluations are better than others?

The "New Critics" and Others

Among literary theorists, the New Critics, the Practical Critics, the structuralists and the deconstructionists present a wide spectrum of answers to these questions. Their movements share a determination to be rigorous and hard-nosed about criticism, in contrast with the slackness that was supposed to prevail early in the century. Of course brief sketches cannot do justice to differences within the schools or to some of the most interesting and readable commentators who have no clear affiliation, such as Edmund Wilson, George Watson, René Wellek, Graham Hough and Frank Kermode.[3] To indicate the problem of labels, Wellek is widely regarded as a New Critic due to his concern with "the work of art in its integrity." Yet he has taken the New Critics to task for their "ahistorical" approach to literature. Watson described the New Criticism, led by John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren, as a Southern, agrarian and reactionary movement, but Terry Comito considers them to be unified not by a philosophy or a literary theory, but by their situation as practicing poets located in universities.

The first two of these four schools are usually attributed to the inspiration of T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis. Some North American critics inspired by Richards became part of a movement that attracted the unfortunate "New Criticism" tag, a label that is affixed to many people who are not sure what they have done to deserve it. Insofar as witting or unwitting New Critics had a common purpose, it was to lift the *standards* of literary criticism, also to put the emphasis on distinctively *literary* aspects of the works. This would emancipate criticism from the casual, the biographical, the historical, the morally censorious and from attempts to reduce literature to something else, whether the product of the battle between id, ego and super-ego, or to an epiphenomenon of the class struggle. Two of the scholarly high points in this tradition are *Theory of Literature* (1942) by René Wellek and Austin Warren and *The Verbal Ikon* (1954) by William K. Wimsatt. The latter contains two important essays that Wimsatt wrote with Monroe C. Beardsley; one criticizes the "intentional fallacy" by showing that the interest of literature is not exhausted by exploring its origins; the other is directed against the "affective fallacy," arguing that a poem cannot be ade-

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quately evaluated in terms of its psychological impact on a reader. The other branch of this development, sometimes called "Practical Criticism," developed more strongly in England and its outposts, under the influence of Leavis and some of his colleagues associated with the journal *Scrutiny* at Cambridge.

As to the perennial questions, neither Practical nor New Critics doubt that individuals create texts. Historical influences and traditions also exist. Literature should be evaluated by distinctly literary criteria, but good literature also tends to be morally uplifting. There is no general position on the question of rival points of view; perhaps the most helpful formulation is offered by Wellek and Warren under the heading of "perspectivism." The aim is to avoid the equally unsound theses of absolutism and relativism in "a new synthesis that makes the scale of values itself dynamic." There is to be no anarchy of values but "a process of getting to know the object from different points of view which may be defined and criticized in their turn."[4]

Structuralism, unfortunately, covers such a multitude of views that it is quite useless as a descriptive term unless it is heavily qualified—as in the following passage from Wellek:

> In general, what is today called "structuralism" in France and what has attracted much public attention through the work in anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss is a bafflingly diverse and even contradictory set of doctrines with the most diverse philosophical affiliations: the mood of Sartre's existentialism, the techniques of Husserl's phenomenology, the fanciful pseudo-science of Gaston Bachelard, modern linguistics ultimately derived from Saussure, and, sometimes, Marxism or Marxist motifs. It provides a rich hodgepodge of methods which—whatever the interest and stimulation afforded may be—suffers from the constant tendency to direct attention away from what I must consider the central concern of criticism: the analysis and evaluation of a work of art in its integrity.[5]

Despite their diversity, it can be said that the various forms of structuralism share a tendency to diminish the individual, an impatience with any suggestion that literary works are autonomous, and a suspicion of attempts to evaluate works in distinctly literary terms. In sum, there is a relentless tendency to reduce individuality and complexity to basic determinants in history and society.

The deconstructionists' revolt against any forms of determinism or reductionism, then, may appear to give them some common ground with the New Critics, but their rejoinder to structuralist reductionism

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has taken on an extremely radical form. Felperin suggests that their structuralist predecessor had "barely scratched the surface of the rhetorical multiplicity it had set out to explore." A more robustly critical attitude to liberal/humanist traditions is deployed by deconstructionists and "a much closer, more strenuous and dangerous encounter with the literary text" is on the agenda (108). Individuals have disappeared—"the death of the author" is a much-used phrase—and it is not clear what positive qualities of texts are admired. As for consensus, the main thrust of the movement seems to be that there is no hope for convergence on true evaluations, certainly not along the lines offered by any other methods.

The Challenge of Deconstruction

Stephen Cox recently suggested that the signs of distress among literary intellectuals have become more urgent than usual, even allowing for their tendency to imitate sociologists and economists in dramatizing their own "crises." To illustrate this point he quoted various writers who urged their readers to resist the literary "turn towards nihilism," to battle current literary theory "head on."[6] These sentiments bring to mind the literary revolution early this century, when a group of reformers led by Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot put to flight the genteel Edwardian tradition of poetry and letters. Graham Hough referred to this period as "a short reign of terror" which was deemed necessary to discredit once and for all the "watery dregs" of late nineteenth-century aesthetics. He quoted Pound on T. E. Hulme: "the bleak and smeary twenties wretchedly needed his guidance, and the pity is that he was not there in person to keep down vermin."[7]

Some of the responses to the new wave of deconstructionist literary criticism are not far removed from the spirit of "keeping down vermin." Cox is more circumspect, although he shares the widespread concern that the tradition of liberal humanism has met yet another subversive influence. He writes that "critical ideologies of many types are engaged in defoliating the great tree of liberal thought." In particular they challenge "liberalism's positive view of the individual's powers of choice, intention and rational understanding." A typical example is furnished by Terence Hawkes:

> If man merely *complies* with the structure of his language to an extent that justifies Heidegger's assertion "language speaks, not man," the same

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> principle forces a similar conclusion in respect of literature: writing writes, not authors.[8]

It appears that the deconstructionists are committed to the task of demystifying the very notion that a text can have any clearcut meaning, or be a vehicle for meaningful communication. This appears to be a thoroughly willful and ultimately self-destructive position to adopt. One explanation for its current vogue is the pressure for theoretical progress in academic circles which creates institutional and psychological incentives for people to come up with something "new." Thus novelty and strangeness become valued for their own sake. The distinguished art historian E. H. Gombrich has proposed a framework to analyze behavior under these conditions, with examples drawn from architecture, fashion and art.[9] This sociological approach is likely to prove fruitful but it is not pursued here; instead the focus will be the logical problem at the heart of the skeptical philosophy that is used by the deconstructionists.

Jacques Derrida and his allies teach that the inescapably linguistic element of discourse has severed our concepts from any objective, nonlinguistic "foundation." This line of thought is strongly skeptical about the reality of the world outside language and in its extreme form it appears to be equally skeptical about the reality or coherence of any world inside language. This is a challenge indeed to liberalism's "positive view of the individual's powers of choice, intention and rational understanding."

The Bright Side of Deconstruction

Felperin is clearly not intimidated by the deconstructionist turn. He acts as a genial host at the deconstructionists' party. This does not mean that he presents himself as an advocate of deconstruction or any other school. He explains in his preface that he is in sympathy with the ongoing critique of institutional practice, the polemic against purist or imperialist tendencies wherever they are found, and as the radical theories themselves become institutionalized he is obliged to turn against them.

Felperin welcomes the ferment over literary theory in the last two decades as a sign that the discipline has reached maturity, achieving a much-needed philosophical sophistication which it previously lacked. His own contact with the philosophical literature appears to be rather limited: Wittgenstein, Rorty, and Heidegger are mentioned and Kuhn's paradigm theory is swallowed whole, with no indication that there might

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be serious counter-arguments against this account of intellectual history. He correctly assigns a certain degree of sophistication to the deconstructionists because they have found how to exploit a profound structural weakness in the Western tradition of rationality and belief. The nature of this weakness is described below; here it is necessary to grasp the whole-blooded nature of the revolt by the radical critics against the idea that statements or theories can be justified by an appeal to the authority of the author, the reader or the world outside the text. As Felperin explains,

> Derridean textualism was conceived as a critique—and transcendence—of the metaphysics of presence supposed to imprison European thought, the logocentric, ultimately religious, superstitious or nostalgic, impulse to ground or centre discourse in an original author, response in a unitary subject, and textuality on a re-presentable world, when all are nothing other than effects and functions of linguistic differences (35).

It seems that "rejection of authority" is the keynote of the deconstructionist challenge to the various literary establishments. Felperin acknowledges that there are a number of rival armies in the field (among them aged New Critics, residual followers of Leavis, feminists and Marxists), but he claims that the deconstructionists hold the initiative in any serious encounter because they have the capacity to undermine any criticism that is directed against them. They have "all the advantages of wit, style, elegance, and the rhetorical agility that derive from their unrepentant literariness"; this enables them to deny (deconstruct) the suggestion that there is any ground where they can be confronted and defeated. "If deconstruction can be historicized or contextualized, so can any historical context be deconstructed" (220).

This "deconstruction of grounds" is a particularly galling blow to the structuralists, who pioneered the notion that language provides the true ground of literary being. What Felperin calls "its technological optimism" soon evolved its own "shadow-side" in the form of deconstruction, which shared the same language-oriented starting point and so engaged structuralism directly on its own territory. Amidst howls of outrage, especially from the new Marxists of structuralism and the old New Critics, deconstruction has made itself at home in the academy, so now the question for other people is how to live with it. Felperin sketches three possible responses: first, to ignore it as a destructive and alien influence that is not even worthy of serious study. Second, to take it sufficiently seriously to argue with it while asserting the claims of some other method with redoubled vigor. Third, to find some creative way to

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make use of its insights and move forward without attempting to create another dogmatic and imperialistic school of thought.

He is prepared to look on the bright side and hope that good will come from the loss of foundations of belief. Commenting on the disappearance of privileged vantage points for authoritative statements, he suggests that this may be a very sad situation if literature and criticism are viewed "by analogy with science, as a body of knowledge." But he goes on to suggest that literature does not have to be approached like this. Perhaps we might become liberated from the obsession with positive knowledge, and so "if literary activity is conceived not as issuing in a body of knowledge but in a mode of being, the absence of certainty or consensus in the study of texts is no longer a disability" (41).

This, then, is the challenge of deconstruction as interpreted by Felperin—to find some way to move forward without foundations of belief, to achieve progress in knowledge and understanding of literature without expecting to produce a body of positive knowledge that is immune to change and revision. But what is the "mode of being" that makes this possible? Here we may obtain some help from Bartley's theory of positions, contexts and metacontexts.[10]

Bartley's work responds to the deconstructionist challenge at a deeper philosophical level than is usually offered by literary scholars and critics. Bartley follows Karl Popper in exploring implications of the breakdown of traditional theories of knowledge and rationality which depend on various authorities for belief. This appears to give them some common ground with the deconstructionists; their work contributes to the current literary debate in two ways. First, it clarifies the logical core of the arguments that the deconstructionists have used to conduct their reign of terror against opponents. Second, it suggests a way to move forward, to create a kind of philosophical space (a metacontext) where the absence of certainty or consensus in the study of texts is no longer a source of anxiety.

The relevant work by Popper and Bartley begins with the recognition of the authoritarian strand which permeates Western thought. This creates demands for "true" or "justified" beliefs, along the lines indicated by the formula: *Beliefs must be justified by an appeal to an authority of some kind (usually the source of the belief in question) and this justification by an appropriate authority makes the belief either rational, or if not rational, at least valid for the person who holds it.*

However, this requirement can never be adequately met due to the problem of validation and the dilemma of *infinite regress versus dogmatism*. Though Sextus Empiricus (circa 200 AD) was one of the first to draw

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attention to this problem, more recently David Hume made it topical with his devastating critique of induction. The dilemma arises as follows: if a belief claims validation by a supporting argument, what justifies that argument? If a critic persists in asking for further supporting statements, when and how does the chain of justification stop? An infinite regress can be forced by anyone who keeps on asking "Why? How do you justify that claim?" This is the opening that is always available for the deconstructionists in their demolition of the "grounds" of rival schools. It appears that it can only be avoided by a dogmatic or arbitrary decision to break the chain at some stage and settle on a belief at that point. Throughout this inquisition the skeptic (here read "the deconstructionist") can avoid making any strong positive claims on his own behalf, provided that he keeps the pressure on his opponents to justify their own position.

Bartley's theory of positions, contexts and metacontexts is an attempt to transcend the limitations that are imposed on criticism by the authoritarian structure of Western thought, a structure that generates the apparently crippling dilemma of infinite regress versus dogmatism. A *position* indicates a theory or a belief about something; i.e., "there is no cheese in the cupboard." Positions are adopted or proposed in *contexts*, e.g., the context of lunchtime. Different positions are logically and empirically possible in any context and this raises the question of the attitude that prevails toward the way positions are held, modified or relinquished. This attitude amounts to a higher-order theory or tradition about the way lower-order theories or beliefs may be justified (or criticized). Bartley has located three of these higher-order traditions, which create climates of thought that he calls *metacontexts*.

One is the Western tradition of justificationism. The second is the Eastern tradition of non-attachment. The third is a tradition of non-dogmatic critical preference which Bartley calls "pancritical rationalism" or "comprehensively critical rationalism."

The justificationist tradition, or metacontext, is exemplified by the authoritarian structure of Western thought which generates attachment, entrenchment and the rigid adherence to positions and party lines. This metacontext generates two very different responses to the problem of rationality and belief.

One is the relativist stance, adopted by disappointed justificationists who realize that positive justification cannot be achieved. From this (correct) premise they proceed to the conclusion that there is no point in trying to find if any positions or beliefs are better than any others. There

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is no such thing as truth, no way to get nearer the truth and no such thing as a rational position.

> Western scepticism . . . arches its brows at all attempts at knowing, all formulations, definitions, identifications—including any definition of its own position. . . . It is born out of the defeat of, and permeated by the spirit of, justificationism. It rejects attachments not out of a positive quest for nonattachment but out of reaction to the internal contradictions of the Western justificationist metacontext.[11]

The other response is the that of the "true believers," the fideists who insist that some positions must be better than others even if there is no logical way to justify a choice. They accept that we make our decision regardless of reason: "Here I stand!" Most forms of rationalism up to date have at rock bottom adopted this attitude, and have suffered severely whenever critics bothered to force this realization upon them.

The Eastern way of non-attachment offers an alternative stance which does not sponsor dogmatic commitments, but it tends to result in apathy about the affairs of the world and the growth of scientific knowledge. It does not produce a dynamic of growth and progress.

It may be that Bartley's third metacontext provides the necessary mix of non-attachment and dynamism that is required to promote inquiry and error-elimination without the hope of certainty. This would appear to satisfy some of the requirements of the "mode of being" that Felperin desires in order that we may live without the hope of locating foundations of belief. In this metacontext no position can be positively justified, but it is quite likely that one will turn out to be better than others in the light of criticism and tests. The quest for justified beliefs is given up; instead the purpose of inquiry is to form tentative critical preferences for one option rather than another, or perhaps simply to specify what criteria would need to be met for a new theory to provide a better solution to the problem at hand. This is a "poised" position, not a flatfooted final resting place, because it is ready to shift in a measured and considered way in response to new evidence and new arguments. It also appears to be highly compatible with the "perspectivism" of Wellek and Warren noted above, that is, a process of getting to know the object from different points of view which may be defined and criticized in their turn.

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Rival Schools United in Creative Self-Criticism

This analysis suggests the conclusion that deconstruction is not so much a radical novelty as a revival of an ancient and honorable tradition of skepticism. It draws its plausibility from the breakdown of virtually all theories of rationality and criticism in the face of the "dogmatism versus infinite regress" dilemma. This in turn arises from the authoritarian tradition (the justificationist metacontext) of Western thought. However, it seems that Popper and Bartley have shown that this authoritarian tradition is not required to sustain viable theories of knowledge and rationality.

Can these ideas of Popper and Bartley solve the problem sketched by Felperin, where rival schools either ignore the challenge of the deconstructionists or attempt to entrench their own position so as to resist the invaders? Can non-deconstructionists liberate themselves from what Northrop Frye called "the Archimedes fallacy . . . the notion that if we plant our feet firmly enough in Christian or democratic or Marxist values we shall be able to lift the whole of criticism at once with a dialectic crowbar"?[12] Is there any way that the warring factions can learn from each other, even if they continue to disagree on fundamental issues? One of the possibilities (which Felperin considers to be most unlikely) is that one or other faction will manage to win out in a Kuhnian "revolution" and establish itself as the new ruling "paradigm" for studies of literature.

M. A. Notturno has addressed a similar situation in psychology where he reports that the representatives of different schools proceed from opposing perspectives and employ different methods, so they scarcely communicate with each other at all.[13] Notturno points out that training in psychology usually starts with an "indoctrination" into one or another of the competing theories. Later, career prospects depend upon approval from the leaders of the same school. This of course discourages students from exploring alternative views. The resulting lack of communication between schools could reflect the basic incommensurability of the rival frameworks (or paradigms, in the language of Kuhn), but Notturno instead blames the unwillingness of scholars to investigate the conceptual foundations of other theories. He detects a tendency to use Kuhn's theories to legitimate this situation, as though Kuhn's historiography is a normative statement about *the way things should be* rather than a contested historical theory. Notturno deplores the dream that one school might emerge as the "unchallenged and universally accepted paradigm of psychology" because this would probably

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owe more to the ideological and political affiliations of the dominant party than to the capacity of the new framework to stand up to criticism.

As an alternative to a "takeover" by one party or another, he advocates "the sort of unification that results from the critical examination of foundational principles." This is precisely the kind of criticism that is facilitated by the metacontext of "pancritical rationalism" or "critical preference" described above. This metacontext does not impose any limit on the criticism of fundamental principles and it provides no pressure for premature closure of options or for entrenching in fixed positions. It promotes creative self-criticism, a process which could enable people in different research traditions to find that they have more in common than they ever realized.

In such a climate of open-ended debate the deconstructionists will need to have more to offer than their capacity to destroy the "foundations" of their opponents—because nobody will attempt to base their arguments on foundations. This may be a difficult situation to imagine at present (like a world without war) in view of the institutional pressures towards ritualistic confrontation, shadow-boxing and defense of academic territories. But still, the challenge to operate without foundations of belief has been offered—by Popper and Bartley, and, in their very different way, by the deconstructionists. It remains to be seen whether the challenge will be accepted, and if so, what sort of dialogue will result.

NOTES

1. Dennis Auerbach, "Liberalism in Search of Its Self", *Critical Review* 1, no. 3 (Summer 1987): 7-29.
2. Tom G. Palmer, Sheldon L. Richman, Dennis Auerbach, Jeffrey Friedman: "Liberalism in Search of Its Self," *Critical Review* 2, no. 1 (Winter 1988): 144-48.
3. Cf. Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle* (London: Fontana, 1961 [1931]); George Watson, *The Literary Critics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962); René Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963); Graham Hough, *Image and Experience: Studies in a Literary Revolution* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1960); Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957).
4. René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1949), 158.

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5. René Wellek, *Discriminations: Further Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 353.
6. Stephen Cox, "Literary Theory: Liberal and Otherwise," *Humane Studies Review* 5, no. 1 (Fall 1987).
7. Graham Hough, *Image and Experience: Studies in a Literary Revolution* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1960), 31.
8. Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (London: Methuen & Co., 1977), 159.
9. E. H. Gombrich, "The Logic of Vanity Fair" in Paul A. Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of Karl Popper* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1974).
10. Bartley was inspired by Popper's 1960 lecture before the British Royal Academy titled "On the Sources of Knowledge and Ignorance," later published in *Conjectures and Refutations* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963). This paper laid bare the authoritarian structure of Western thought and proposed a non-authoritarian theory of knowledge. Bartley followed with a non-authoritarian theory of rationality which he presented in *The Retreat to Commitment* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1962) and "Rationality versus the Theory of Rationality" in Mario Bunge, ed., *The Critical Approach to Science and Literature* (London: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1964). His more recent thoughts on metacontexts are summarized in Appendix 1 to the revised edition of *The Retreat to Commitment* (La Salle, Ill: Open Court, 1985).
11. Bartley, *The Retreat to Commitment* (rev. ed.), 176.
12. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 12.
13. M. A. Notturno, "The Popper/Kuhn Debate: Truth and Two Faces of Relativism" in *Psychological Medicine* 14 (1984): 273–89.

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Gerald Graff

TOWARD CONSTRUCTIVE DECONSTRUCTION: REPLY TO CHAMPION

To be brutally frank at the outset, the trouble with this sort of essay on deconstruction (it's similar to a good many critiques published over the past few years, and especially lately in the wake of the controversy over Paul de Man's wartime writings) is that the author hasn't done enough homework. His understanding of what deconstruction is all about is simply too primitive to do anything but mislead. Lest this statement seem self-righteous, I should admit that I have an uncomfortable suspicion in reading such essays that things I published some years ago (primarily an essay entitled "Fear and Trembling at Yale," but also some parts of my book *Literature Against Itself*) have contributed to this sort of ignorance.

The problem of the indeterminacy, or as Derrida prefers to say, the "undecidability," of meaning simply has not been well understood outside the precincts of specialized philosophers and literary theorists, and not too often even inside those precincts. It is certainly a gross misconception to take deconstruction to be saying that the meaning of any text is subject to an unlimited "freeplay" that licenses interpreters to attribute any meaning they like to a text. It's an equally gross misconception to attribute to deconstruction the idea that truth is a fiction, or that reality is nothing more than a creation of language. Nor should deconstruction be confused with nihi-

The author, professor of English at Northwestern University, is currently in residence at the Harvard University Center for Literary and Cultural Studies.

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lism, relativism, skepticism, or subjectivism—at least not without a complicated process of argument which would take up Derrida's frequent explanations of why these labels are mistaken.

When Derrida says, "there is nothing outside the text," what he means is not that there is no reality outside language, but rather that since we can only understand reality through acts of interpretation mediated by linguistic conventions, there's a sense in which we "read" the world the same ways we read written texts. What keeps this from being merely a trivial point are several further arguments: 1. Our reading of anything, written or "social" text, is always context-relative, and there is no ultimately *privileged* context for any reading. That is, the answer to question "What should the context be?" of our interpretation of this or that phenomenon is never self-evident, but always in principle open to interpretive dispute. 2. This problematic openness of the context of interpretation is not only a fact about texts but one that "inscribes" itself in various ways *within* those texts, and can be read back from them by a deconstructive reading. 3. Such a reading is often a reading of the contexts which the text has *excluded* or strategically repressed, the principle here being that what we *don't* say, what we leave out, is an absence that structures and makes possible what we put in. A deconstructive reading is one that goes back over the "construction" of a text and shows how the text got constructed by its exclusions. 4. Insofar as a deconstructive reading is thus an account of how certain meanings and concepts were produced, it leads, or can lead, quite readily into a *historical* form of analysis—so the popular argument that deconstruction is inherently ahistorical, apolitical, etc., is mistaken.

I might add by way of example that I was strongly influenced (in spite of myself, and unwittingly) by deconstructionist thinking in my recent "institutional history" of academic literary studies in the U.S. (*Professing Literature* [Chicago, 1987]). The concept of the literature department, as I told the story, had been structured by the forgetting, or repression, of the unresolved conflict between humanistic tradition and secularized professionalism that still divides literature professors, but which the profession of a unified "English studies" tends to mask.

Here is at least one of the things deconstruction is getting at concerning the indeterminacy or undecidability of meaning. In other words, one of the central questions raised by deconstruction is what we mean by "context" itself, and what we're doing when we appeal to context in interpretation. We talk casually about "taking statements out of context," "attending more closely to the context," etc., yet we rarely think much about what such moves mean or what may be at stake in them.

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You can begin to see what is at stake if you think about this question of context in relation to the academic division of the disciplines and ask, what should be the context in which we study literature, religion, law, philosophy, sociology, etc.? For example, in academic literary studies today a heated dispute has arisen over the extent to which questions of politics having to do with race, gender, and social hierarchy are relevant contexts for reading literary works. Deconstructionists have also suggested that the effects of rhetorical or "literary" structures such as metaphor are relevant contexts for reading philosophy, legal hermeneutics, even science, while a good many scholars strongly resist the notion that these are relevant contexts for doing work in these departments. Insofar as any question about what a text means is a question about the relevant contexts to be applied to it, it carries us directly into the sorts of political boundary-disputes which are now dividing so many of the disciplines. Understood in this light—that is, as a challenge to the supposedly self-evident definitions and classifications of the academic fields and divisions of knowledge—I think deconstruction begins to look very much more interesting, useful, and valid than the frivolously nihilistic playing with language that critics like Champion understand it to be.

What I'm saying is that we may be able to clear up some of the confusion that has attended the "indeterminacy debate" if we see that what underlies it is the struggle going on across the disciplines (and one could find its counterpart in the broader culture in conflicts over AIDS, abortion, South Africa, etc.) for the right to bring political, psychological, and institutional contexts into interpretive practices, contexts that go beyond and often directly challenge the delimited contexts sanctioned and regulated by those disciplines. To put the point even more bluntly, one thing that has underlaid the indeterminacy debate in the university is the right to ask political questions about interpretive practices which have always been depoliticized (i.e., their politics repressed) by the prevailing disciplinary conventions, which regulate what counts as a legitimate question, avenue of inquiry, or research program in a given discipline. Here is why disputes over questions of determinacy and relativism in interpretation have been inseparable from disputes over the proper boundary-lines of academic departments, and the extent to which literary critics, philosophers, legal scholars, and others can and should transgress those boundaries.

There is much more to say, of course, but I hope this short response will at least indicate why such polemics as Champion's against deconstruction are misleading, and why deconstruction is more interesting and useful than one would suppose from reading them.

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Geoffrey Sampson

THAT STRANGE REALM CALLED THEORY

FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE, rev. ed.

by Jonathan Culler

Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986. 157pp., $22.50 ($5.95 paper)

IN SEARCH OF SEMIOTICS

by David Sless

Totawa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble, 1986. 170pp., $28.50

David Lodge's 1984 novel *Small World* portrays an academic profession in near-perpetual motion between international conferences. "Half the passengers on transatlantic flights these days are university teachers. Their luggage is heavier than average, weighed down with books and papers—and bulkier, because their wardrobes must embrace both formal wear and leisurewear. . . . For that's the attraction of the conference circuit: it's a way of converting work into play, combining professionalism with tourism, and all at someone else's expense. Write a paper and see the world!"

To many academic readers, myself included, this passage touches a raw nerve. If we are working at the frontiers of science, there is no doubt that we push those frontiers outwards more quickly if we periodically exchange experiences and ideas with like-minded colleagues elsewhere; and, even in the 1980s, it is fairly easy for us to get access to public funds

The author is Director of the Centre for Computer Analysis of Language and Speech, University of Leeds. His recent books include *An End to Allegiance* (1984), *Writing Systems* (2nd rev. ed. 1987), and *The Computational Analysis of English* (co-edited with Roger Garside and Geoffrey Leech, 1987).

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for the purpose. Yet however useful these meetings may be, they are undoubtedly at the same time thoroughly enjoyable holidays from the tedium of our normal routine, commonly held in attractive locations: many of the taxpayers who send us on these trips could not afford equally satisfying vacations for themselves. Can we be sure that the level of expenditure involved is fully justified by the resulting scientific gains?

For Lodge's academic nomads this question, if they let it worry them, would be specially acute. His characters are no inorganic chemists or cardiologists; the comic force of his novel stems largely from the fact that its subjects are literature specialists, who go through all the outward motions by which scientific disciplines expand the total of human knowledge while actually being engaged in an enterprise in which the concepts of knowledge and discovery seem scarcely to apply. Literary criticism is a domain of subjective judgments rather than empirical findings. How can a serious research discipline be founded on matters of personal taste?

One may well ask. Academics of earlier centuries would have been puzzled at the idea of "English" as a discipline which can be studied for bachelors' and higher degrees. Here and there the concept is still resisted. The Oxford college of which I am a member declines to accept undergraduates to read for degrees in English, on the ground that "they're supposed to know English before they come." Indeed I believe that in Britain it was not until fairly late in the nineteenth century that modern foreign languages such as German and French came to be seen as subjects for university-level study, though these do at least involve solid facts about grammar and idiom to be learned alongside the discussion of literature.

Nowadays, though, English Literature not merely is accepted as an academic discipline but has attained a central place in the map of learning. As the expansion of higher education in the 1960s changed university degrees from luxuries for the few to routine requirements for the many, English as a safe and easy option was a subject that attracted particularly large influxes of new students. The fact that it involved consideration of human emotions and relationships made it particularly appealing to the women students who were for the first time entering higher education in large numbers. Increased student numbers meant more staff posts, and the many people taken on to teach in university English departments had perforce to develop the research dimension of "lit. crit." in order to establish their standing among their academic peers.

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Nowadays, university staff numbers in Britain and perhaps elsewhere are beginning to shrink; but it is noticeable that the reductions are affecting chiefly the "hard sciences" such as chemistry and physics, while English and modern languages remain relatively unaffected—which has nothing to do with anyone's judgment of the relative value of subjects, and everything to do with patterns of student choice. Evaluating the relative worth of different subjects is not an activity that normally happens in the academic world, imbued as it is with the professional ethos that rejects the right of any but practitioners of a discipline to set that discipline's standards. If literature specialists did not engage in any activity which they called research, other academics would not take them seriously; but, provided they agree among themselves to count some activity as valid research, then so far as practitioners of older-established subjects are concerned it *is* research. That is how the university world works.

Plenty of activities done by literature specialists in the name of research are clearly solid and respectable: establishing the correct texts of early classics, tracing authors' intellectual biographies, and so forth. But in the world of *Small World* this sort of research does not rate. In literary studies as in science, star status is reserved for those involved in theory. The chief question agitating Lodge's characters is who will get a lavishly-funded new post, the UNESCO Chair of Literary Criticism, and what theoretical tendency will be favored through the choice—"formalist, structuralist, Marxist or deconstructionist?" The non-theoreticians are *Small World's* hewers of wood and drawers of water, patronized and laughed at by the serious contenders.

It is not easy, however, to say what the theories in question are theories *of*. The phrase "literary theory" is too narrow, because the kinds of discourse that the real-life counterparts to Lodge's characters engage in do not limit their purview to literature but extend to other arts and to "culture" in a very general sense. Sometimes the phrase "critical theory" is used; but even this is evidently perceived as unduly specific, and quite frequently people eschew any qualifying adjective and talk of "theory" *tout court*—as does Jonathan Culler in the Preface to one of the books under review, who suggests that reading Saussure is "an excellent way of sorting out what is going on today in that strange realm called 'theory.' " The center of gravity of the community contributing to the strange realm lies in university English departments, but members crop up under plenty of other headings also. David Sless, author of the other book reviewed, is Director of the "Communication Advisory and Research Enterprise" at one Australian institution of tertiary education

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and Senior Lecturer in Communication at another, and the genesis of his book occurred during a sabbatical spent at a British "Centre for Cultural Studies"—such titles would be familiar to Lodge's Small Worlders.

Saussure as Linguist

Among the gurus of "theory," few names are as numinous as that of Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of structuralism—probably the most successful of the many isms that have competed for Small Worlders' attention. Cognoscenti will tell you that structuralism has had its day; but then, in the forefront of the trends that have supplanted it is "deconstructionism," which as its name suggests is consciously defined in reaction to structuralism and thus owes perhaps as much to Saussure in a negative fashion as structuralism does positively. If there is any substance in "theory," a goodly portion of it must surely be found in Saussure.

Yet Saussure, so far as I know, had no professional interest in literature at all (if one discounts an engagingly dotty unpublished investigation of the idea that Roman poets hid anagrams of people's names in their poems). Indeed, to describe Saussure as a guru is quite unfair if one considers that the central use of that word at present seems to be as a self-description by various South Asian operators who manipulate the religious yearnings of naive young people in order to enrich themselves in what looks like a purely cynical fashion. Saussure had no notion of what his name would come to stand for in the late twentieth century; if anyone had told him, I guess he would have been flabbergasted. He died in 1913 (aged 56), having spent his career teaching linguistics in Paris and Geneva. All his publications were about the history and prehistory of the Indo-European language family: he was famous for making a major advance at the early age of 21 in the task of reconstructing the sound-system of the Proto-Indo-European language from which most European languages ultimately descend (the theory which he put forward then was later corroborated by tangible evidence discovered after his death). All this work is highly technical, and scarcely anyone reads it today. But, towards the end of his life, Saussure several times gave a course of lectures on the general nature of language considered from an abstract, philosophical point of view; and although he himself deliberately refrained from publishing this material, some of his colleagues collated his students' lecture notes and turned them into a book after

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Saussure's death. It is that book—*A Course in General Linguistics*—that all the fuss has been about.

The central idea of the *Course* is that a language is a system of units which cannot be considered in isolation from one another because they mutually determine each other's values: the *Course* frequently draws an analogy with a game of chess, where the potentiality of a given piece at any moment depends not merely on what piece it is but where it is relative to the positions of the other pieces, so that moving one piece changes the values of all the others. As a linguist myself I recognize a measure of truth in this. For instance, the range of shades we call *red* in English is limited by the existence of various other words naming adjacent colors—*orange, pink, purple, brown*; in a language which possesses markedly fewer color words, the translation of *red* will typically cover a larger share of the spectrum. At the same time, the validity of the point has its limits. The translation of *four* surely means precisely the number four even in a language lacking names for large numbers. Saussure's *Course* discusses a number of general ideas about languages as abstract systems of relationships, and in my judgment most of his ideas are broadly acceptable but by no means absolute truths.

Saussure as Theorist

What is not clear is how these ideas, whether right or wrong, tell us anything new and important—anything at all, indeed—about literary or cultural considerations. All the detailed discussion and examples in the *Course* relate to technical linguistic structure. Yet the book has been taken as a key document in the development of critical theory, by people who have no knowledge of or interest in the technicalities of linguistics. In particular, the concept of a structure as a set of units defined by their mutual relationships is claimed to be seminal for modern thought. According to Culler's Conclusion, Saussure offers "an exceptionally clear expression" of "a major shift in our conception of the world": "for the thought of our century the world is no longer essentially a collection of independent entities, of autonomous objects, but a series of relational systems"—a claim which Culler supports by alluding to Modernist literature, Cubist painting, and relativistic physics. Culler sees Saussure's achievement in articulating this novel outlook as sufficiently significant to make Saussure possibly (Culler cautiously hedges his bet at this point) the "twentieth-century Galileo."

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It may be symptomatic that, of the three examples of twentieth-century relativism quoted by Culler, he spends only a few rather waffly lines on the two belonging to domains likely to be familiar to his audience, namely literature and art (he leaves me unsure which writers his phrase "Modernist literature" is meant to refer to), while taking much more space to argue that Saussure's outlook matches distinctive modern trends in physics. If there is a correspondence in this case it can hardly be more than coincidental: physicists adopted relativity theory because it accounted well for their observations, and certainly not because it suited a *Zeitgeist* manifested in literature and linguistics. Culler does not pretend that more than coincidence is at work; yet he feels it worth discussing physics at length. By doing so, he associates his topic with the prestige that belongs to theoretical science; and this, it seems to me, is a regular part of the strategy of those who seek to turn talking about literature into a serious research discipline. The public has come to understand over three centuries that when natural scientists develop and debate alternative abstract theories they are entitled to respect, since this behavior leads to a cumulative increase in empirical knowledge, often very useful or power-conferring knowledge. Literary theorizing surely cannot hope to engender a comparable product, but it can try to commandeer a share of the respect by sounding similar.

Repeatedly, Culler uses turns of phrase that pastiche science. "[Saussure's] work contains different lines of argument, whose angles and force must be calculated"; "To . . . stimulate thought about fundamentals, to insist on the relational nature of linguistic phenomena: these are the vectors of Saussure's theory." Metaphors are harmless, but what is the metaphorical force of "vector" here? I know three senses the word has in various sciences, but none of them appear even figuratively appropriate in this context. Near the end of his book Culler quotes the impenetrable French thinker Jacques Lacan, "who calls the Saussurian model of the sign an indispensable algorithm: 'S/s, which is read as the signifier over the signified . . . .' " "Algorithm" is an unambiguous word, which is entirely incompatible with this context: neither a "model" nor an algebraic formula such as S/s can be an algorithm. But, though strictly meaningless, such remarks induce in the naive reader an agreeable frisson of contact with intellectual domains known to be both highly difficult and highly valuable. Saussure may have been no guru in the modern sense, but his name is invoked in connection with behavior that often seems quite guru-like.

Culler, like many proponents of structuralism, lays stress on the fact that linguistics since Saussure has been genuinely scientific in its intel-

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lectual texture. The suggestion here seems to be that Saussure showed the way in which a subject previously characterized by the non-cumulative methods of the humanities could convert itself into a discipline ranking alongside physics or chemistry. But, if this is what is intended it is doubly misleading. In the first place, linguistics was scientific before Saussure too. Although his *Course* was associated with an important shift of emphasis within the subject, that shift had nothing to do with the arts/science contrast. More important, the texture of day-to-day activity in modern scientific linguistic research really owes rather little to Saussure. Whether one thinks of pure theoretical linguists, who refine theories about structural constraints on the diversity of human languages with a view to the light they shed on genetically-inherited human cognitive mechanisms, or of computational linguists who develop software capable of dealing with the complexities of natural-language structure in order to permit the automation of practical language-processing tasks, in either case the advance of knowledge consists in developing and testing masses of abstract but extremely specific hypotheses which are accepted or rejected in terms of their compatibility with particular observed facts, which are often trivial in themselves but happen to be crucial for a particular hypothesis. Philosophical generalities about the relational nature of linguistic units and the like don't come into it: that sort of thing is good for inspiring enthusiasm in first-year undergraduates or for Sunday-paper think-pieces, but it is scarcely relevant to serious research (just as, I imagine, a chemist pursuing some special problem in the domain of aromatic compounds does not waste much time thinking about what we mean by "chemical reaction").

With critical theory, on the other hand, one does not seem to encounter work that moves beyond the philosophical generalities and gets down to the hard slog of promulgating detailed hypotheses and bringing them to bear on trivial but empirical observations. The crucial interplay between theory and observation, in Karl Popper's terms between "conjectures and refutations," scarcely gets off the ground in this domain. New isms supplant old isms, but not, so far as an outsider can judge, because the old isms unexpectedly fall foul of recalcitrant observations—has there ever been a literary Michelson-Morley experiment? How could there be? Yet, if there couldn't, how can the language of "research" and "findings" be appropriate in the world of literary and cultural discourse?

There is no need of empirical research to fuel the turnover of theories, when literary reviews are constantly avid for novel ideas to titillate their readers, and young academics need to move their careers along by

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making their mark as original thinkers. But, if this is all that theory-change in the literary domain amounts to—and Culler says nothing to dispel our suspicion that that is so—then does it not demean Galileo's name to suggest that his modern equivalent might be a man associated with this sort of intellectual modishness? Galileo faced the Inquisition because observation led him to dissent from received views. The only risk facing denizens of the Small World is the drying up of conference invitations, and they avoid that risk not by staying with traditional wisdom but by thinking up new ideas—any new ideas, provided they can persuade their peers to find them interesting.

The A Priori Science

For those who seek to turn Saussure into the forerunner of an all-embracing revolution in human thought, it is desirable to be able to show that Saussure himself saw his ideas as having implications beyond the limited domain of technical linguistics. For this reason, much attention has been paid to the brief passages in the *Course* where Saussure proposes "a science which would study the life of signs within society," which he called "semiology." "Since [this science] does not yet exist," Saussure said, "we cannot say what it will be; but it has a right to existence; its place is assured in advance." For Saussure it was self-evident that linguistics, which did already exist, was just a special case: "the laws which semiology discovers will be applicable to linguistics." Linguistics deals with those signs belonging to the systems we call languages; semiology was to deal with all conventional signs, including those constituting language but also many others, for instance the acts prescribed by codes of etiquette and ritual.

The name which has nowadays become attached to this alleged general science of signs is for some reason not Saussure's coinage "semiology" but rather a word created by the American philosopher C. S. Peirce, "semiotics." Under this name, the subject conceived by Saussure has been brought to birth and equipped with a flourishing apparatus of university courses, books, and academic journals devoted to it. For Culler, the question whether Saussure is truly the modern Galileo depends centrally on whether or not the new discipline of semiotics is destined to "become a dominant intellectual movement of our time" (an issue which Culler says is not yet clear).

For anyone interested in the history of science, though, Saussure's conception of a science which has not yet been invented but whose place

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is waiting for it must surely be suspect. It is characteristic of real sciences to link phenomena not previously seen to be related. Before Newton, would it have seemed self-evident that there was a science waiting to be created that would describe the tides, the motions of the planets, the movement of an apple falling from a tree and the flight of an arrow as diverse aspects of a unified phenomenon? I think not. Conversely, many people expected there to be a science which linked the motions of the planets with human birth-times and personalities, but it turned out there wasn't one. Why should we expect a priori that there are any interesting, non-trivial laws to be discovered that apply to all kinds of conventional sign?

The evolution of linguistic science since Saussure's day, as it happens, has made it increasingly implausible that linguistics is a special case of a general science of signs. The most fertile area where deep and apparently true new laws of language have emerged relates to the "recursive" nature of grammar—the fact that sentences contain constituents such as phrases and clauses of various categories nested one within another in a hierarchical fashion. Let me give an example (oversimplified, but it will serve to illustrate the point). It seems to be a universal law obeyed by all human languages that whenever a grammatical rule moves a constituent of a particular category from one place in a sentence to another, if an example of the relevant category contains a smaller example nested inside itself the rule may only apply to the larger constituent and not to the smaller. For instance, in the English sentence *She called on the man who wrote those songs*, the words *the man who wrote those songs* form a noun phrase containing within itself the smaller noun phrase *those songs*. Accordingly, we can question the larger phrase and ask *Which man did she call on?*, but (despite the fact that it would be a perfectly sensible question to ask) we may not question the included noun phrase and ask *Which songs did she call on the man who wrote?*

Now recursivity is a property possessed by few sign-systems other than language. Ritual activities, or the "languages" of national flags or flowers (to quote two further instances of the domain of semiotics as portrayed in David Sless's book) seem not to have recursive grammars, so that laws comparable to the one just sketched cannot meaningfully be extended to such topics. In general, as modern scientific linguistics has succeeded in uncovering an increasingly rich and deep structure of universal laws of human language, so it has made language seem less and less like a special, unusually complex case of some more general phenomenon—instead language now seems *sui generis*, scarcely compa-

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rable with other sign systems. If that is right, the enterprise of semiotics is presumably on a hiding to nothing.

Hence, perhaps, Sless's title. Sless writes as someone convinced that a substantial, valuable discipline called semiotics exists, but who finds that no one can tell him what it consists of. The writings of the discipline's practitioners are little help: "obfuscation and esoteric jargon have rendered much of it unintelligible"—the newcomer is "confused by strange terminology, made uneasy by loose reasoning, concerned over an absence of method and alarmed by sweeping generalisations."

Yet an academic discipline *is* the writings and discourses of its practitioners. Ideas, beliefs, and theories are human creations; a discipline which is riddled with non sequiturs, undefined terms, and the like is what it is, it is not an imperfect reflection of some Platonic ideal discipline that no mortal has succeeded in articulating. Initially, one might suppose that Sless is depicting a situation in which the ideas of a few serious thinkers have been confused and overlaid by the exegeses of a host of third-raters, so that Sless's task would be to disentangle the meaningful, valuable material from the rubbish for the benefit of newcomers unsure which is which. But as the book proceeds it becomes clear that this is not so: there are no semioticians who think and write clearly and convincingly, or if there are Sless does not pay special attention to them.

Like other inhabitants of the Small World, Sless seems unaware of the very possibility that an academic discipline may be vacuous. Just because a word ending in -ology or -ics has been coined and used as the title of university departments (though, parenthetically, I am not sure that any university does have a whole department of semiotics), one is not entitled to assume that what lies behind that title is more than empty words. If the beliefs of the fifteenth century coexisted with the twentieth-century structure of higher education, diligent youngsters would be notching up credits towards degrees in astrology—which would make it politically quite awkward to assert that astrology is bunk: but bunk it is. If Sless once entertained the possibility of vacuity, the evidence he accumulates would make it difficult for him to avoid the conclusion that semiotics is twentieth-century astrology. Nowhere does his "search for semiotics" reach firm ground, a fact which he admits quite frankly. "There are many different accounts of what semiotics should be and this has precipitated a far-reaching and sometimes extravagant debate about this *possible* subject; so that when someone tells us that they are an expert in semiotics, we should understand this to mean that they are knowl-

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edgeable about the debate, for there is no real subject of semiotics, . . . only a tantalising possibility."

Perhaps Sless hopes that he himself has succeeded in writing clearly and cogently, avoiding the obfuscations of all his semiotician predecessors. But he makes no such claim—in this respect he is becomingly modest; and if he nevertheless privately cherishes the hope, I fear it is ill-founded. Try the following passage, for instance:

> The landscape of communication is more like the surface of a giant trampoline than terra firma. When a trampoline yields as we walk across it the feeling may be one of uncontrollable and hence chaotic movement but we know that the trampoline is obeying strict physical laws of elasticitiy. . . . Some rather wild and woolly thinkers following in the footsteps of the post-structuralist Parisian Jacques Derrida have discovered that they can lurch uncontrollably across the surface of the trampoline, limbs flying in stylistic spasms. . . .

It makes no better sense in context, I promise.

But Sless closes his mind to the possibility that his search might have no object. While modest about the extent to which he or others have succeeded in articulating semiotics, he is the reverse of modest about the significance of what it is they find it so hard to articulate. "The scope of the semiotic vision is breathtaking in its scale, and the first lesson of the semiotic method should be humility in the face of something much greater and more complex than oneself." Harnessing such overblown rhetoric to such poverty of substance, how can Sless avoid being laughed to scorn? Like Culler, he wraps himself in the language of science as a protective coloration. But Sless, who makes even larger claims than Culler for the significance of his subject, takes the strategy of validation by reference to science much further.

It is not just that Sless uses more in the way of quasi-algebraic notations than Culler, and supports his claims about semiotics by appealing more frequently and in greater detail to allegedly comparable principles in the hard sciences—though both these things are true. Thus, in order to clarify the problem that meaning is simultaneously the semiotician's object of study and an aspect of his subjective intellectual life, Sless resorts to a couple of pages on the quantum theory of particle physics, illustrated by two "Feynman diagrams" together with one of the most complex equations I have ever seen used in any context. (Its terms are left entirely unexplained, so its only function in Sless's book is to put the reader in the right mood.) But furthermore, where Culler treats natural science as a paradigm of intellectual achievement, with which he is

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anxious to associate his own field, for Sless the scientists frequently seem to be a bunch of stumblebums, who will be far outpaced by semiotics just as soon as the latter becomes comprehensible. "[I]t is clear from Feynman diagrams that there has been a failure within physics to articulate a logic of positions. . . . There is no set of diagrams, notation or calculus in physics which is equivalent to the notation developed in [my] text. . . . [U]ntil physics . . . begins with due humility to articulate its own logic of positions, semiotics is on its own; it may be that the decisive advance in understanding in physics will come from developments and discoveries in semiotics." Later, Sless discusses Gödel's theorem, one of the principal achievements of twentieth-century mathematical logic: "Gödel tells us only what happens, without explaining why. . . . It is the [semiotic] *stand-for* relation, which mathematics cannot explain, which enables us to understand why any system will always be incomplete." (But Gödel's theorem does not say that any logical system must be incomplete, which is untrue—only that any system fulfilling certain specific conditions must be incomplete.)

Pretensions as large as Sless's make it difficult to find a moderate stance in response. Either this admittedly turgid, obscure and jargon-ridden academic trend really is about to knock the intellectual giants of the twentieth century into a cocked hat, or it is empty. Since the book has found a publisher, presumably some readers are expected to accept the former alternative—perhaps they will.

David Lodge evidently has no illusions about the status of the activity he participates in. (Lodge is himself a university teacher of English, whose most recent academic book was *Working with Structuralism*.) The climax of Lodge's novel arrives when Persse McGarrigle, the Candide figure whose quest gives the book its structure, stands up at the conclusion of a forum on critical theory at the Modern Language Association of America and puts to each rival theorist the question "What follows if everybody agrees with you?" The question is devastatingly unanswerable.

Culler and Sless, on the other hand, take the Small World entirely seriously, and thereby expose its hollowness. Reading Lodge, I wondered whether the items he had picked out to satirize for his readers' delectation might not be concealing some nuggets of serious thought. The books under review make the truth all too clear. Literature is there to be read and enjoyed; not theorized about.

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Karen Shabetai

FACTS ARE STUBBORN THINGS

SKEPTICAL ENGAGEMENTS

by Frederick Crews

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> It is extremely surprising that empiricism should be so universally unpopular. The common understanding, it might be supposed, would eagerly adopt a programme which promises to satisfy it through exclusively empirical knowledge and the rational connections there revealed—in preference to the transcendental dogmatism which compels it to rise to concepts far outstripping the insight and rational faculties of the most practiced thinkers. But this is precisely what commends such dogmatism to the common understanding. For it then finds itself in a position in which the most learned can claim no advantage over it. If it understands little or nothing about these matters, no one can boast of understanding much more . . . there is no end to the plausible arguments which it can propound, wandering as it does amidst mere ideas, about which no one knows anything, and in regard to which it is therefore free to be as eloquent as it pleases; whereas when matters that involve the investigation of nature are in question, it has to stand silent and to admit its ignorance. Thus indolence and vanity combine in sturdy support of these principles.
>
> —*Kant, "Antinomy of Pure Reason"*[1]

The subject of Frederick Crews's *Skeptical Engagements* is the persistence of what Kant calls transcendental dogmatism and Crews labels "seductive dogma" (xi): theories that are united by their "anti-empiricism" (xvi). According to Crews, these theories remain popular, especially

The author, who teaches English literature at the University of Washington, has published articles on Blake and Keats and is working on a book on the Romantics and ethics.

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amongst literary intellectuals, because they are "impressive sounding"—in Kant's words, "free to be as eloquent as [they] please." The reviews and review essays that comprise *Skeptical Engagements* are concerned in particular with Freudian psychoanalysis, Marxism, and other "isms" considered to result from theoreticians' "fear of facing the world, including its works of literature, without an intellectual narcotic ready at hand" (xi). Critical theory, which Crews labels "theoreticism," is, he insists, "the most notable—and . . . the most noxious—change in academic intellectual style over the past quarter-century" (159). A central concern of all Crews's essays is the persistence in the academy—especially in literature departments—of theories without the epistemological legitimation that empirical data afford.

Correlative to this issue are the ethical and moral consequences of theory, so often scorned or ignored by theoreticians: issues arising, for instance, from such diverse events as Stalin's crimes and Freud's abuse of his patients. Crews's warnings about the significant dangers of theory's reckless attitude about evidence and consequences have become especially pertinent with regard to current disputes in the humanities.

What brings the two topics together—the anti-empirical bias and real consequences of theory—follows from Crews's distinction between two kinds of empiricism. "Foundationalist" empiricism, a faith "in the availability of neutral grounds for infallibly showing which of several hypotheses or theories is 'closest to the truth' " has, as Crews notes, been virtually abandoned. What he continues to defend, however, is the "broader sense" of empiricism: the notion that "even [science's] most formalized reasoning is ultimately answerable to the testing of predicted consequences" (164), and in general the "disposition to consult ascertainable facts when choosing between rival ideas." Although he doesn't deal with the problematic nature of facts themselves, I agree that it is still of utmost importance to "care about evidence," as Crews puts it. Even if there is no absolute truth or possible access to it if it were to exist, one must be able to have some basis to applaud good and to condemn evil.

Crews pursues his favored themes—"the nature, appeal, and consequences of closed, self-validating doctrines; the resultant indispensability of an empirical (evidence-oriented) point of view; and the dubious effects of literary-critical methods that spurn that point of view" (xi)—with the rigor, intelligence and wit that his readers have come to expect. *Skeptical Engagements* is divided into three sections: one on Freudian psychoanalysis, another on deconstruction and Marxism, and a third on "individual authors and critics" (181). "Freud and Marx thought of themselves as lawgivers," contends Crews, "of psychic etiology and

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cure in the one case and of political economy and historical development in the other" (165). But what is astonishing to Crews the skeptic is that, while historical reality has invalidated Marxist theory, many within the academy pretend that Marxism and Freudianism are not only alive and well, but infallible. Especially dangerous are those scholars who, when faced with evidence that would falsify their most important claims, decide to scorn empirical verification altogether; their theory, whether Marxism, Freudianism, or some other "scheme of drastic liberation" (xix), then becomes the equivalent of a religious faith. Pointing to the irony of calling these followers "theorists," because a theorist presumably hopes to "maintain a thesis against likely objections" (xvi), Crews ridicules "loyal followers" of such figures as Althusser, Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, Habermas, Lacan and Jameson.

From Freud to Foucault

According to Crews, most of these figures are generically Freudian, even such post-structuralists as Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault. In attacking the unsubstantiated Freudian claims upon which they rely (to a widely varying degree, it must be said), Crews relies heavily on Adolf Grunbaum's *The Foundations of Psychoanalysis* (1984). Grunbaum demonstrates the lack of evidence to empirically validate *any* of the central claims of Freudian psychoanalysis, and he complains that psychoanalysis cannot even substantiate its claim to be an effective treatment. Crews reminds us that we only need to look to Freud's famous case studies for "a record of confessed or implied failure" (21). But, Crews contends, the followers of Freudian methodologies remain dogmatic. Comparing the responses following the appearance of his own now famous attacks on psychoanalysis—"Analysis Terminable" in 1980 and "The Future of an Illusion" in 1985—he documents a startling change in the arguments employed by Freud's defenders. In 1980 Freudians were still denying the charge that there is not a shred of evidence to support their assertions, while in 1985 their cries of protest invoked religious and mystical explanations for continuing to follow an unverifiable doctrine. Especially in the literary profession, psychoanalysis is adhered to with a religious faith; it is in Crews's words, like Marxism, an "opiate of the intellectuals" (107).

Likewise, academic Marxism seems insulated from its historical, political failures. It was only after the Russian Revolution and before Stalinism that Marxism could plausibly promise to alleviate suffering

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and promote justice (137). As Crews says of Freudians and followers of "other faiths," Marxists appear to have a "psychic immunity from rationally based criticism" (89). When "faced with seemingly fatal objections"—such as Stalinist Russia—Marxism "rebounds" in the academy because its grand theory is "inseparable from its believers' private sense of spiritual vitality and worth" (89).

Althusser and Jameson are particular targets in Crews's essays on intellectual Marxism. Before Althusser strangled his wife (thus removing himself from the debate), he had redirected French thought with his critique of Sartre's humanist Marxism. Althusser's was a structuralist Marxism that conceived subjectivity as the product of ideology. This rejection of individual subjectivity served the useful function of helping to "explain [away] Stalinism without discrediting Marxism itself" (145). Unlike the *Partisan Review* group, which Crews evaluates in a later chapter, Althusser lacked the "earnestness of the New York intellectuals as they tried to dissociate themselves from Stalin's crimes without losing all political commitment" (195). Concomitant with his dismissal of the human subject, Althusser rejected the notion of false consciousness; ideology, to him, was not something that we must expose and escape from, because we are always already *inside* ideology. In his attempt to make Marxism into a science, French style, Althusser liberated it from "empirical scruples," claiming it "could be judged only by criteria already contained in its own theoretical discourses" (145). To Crews, Althusserian Marxism's lack of inductive empiricism makes it a pseudoscience. Like most Crewsian villains, structuralist Marxism remains prestigious inside the American academy—usually in literature, not history departments—long after it has been discredited in French intellectual circles.

One of the American Marxists who has made Althusser a hero is Fredric Jameson. His *The Political Unconscious* (1981) draws on many fashionable sources from Lacan to Foucault, "ecumenically incorporating extremes rather than avoiding them" (152). It is not surprising that this book has become a bible for American literary Marxists, and that Jameson has become their guru. The review of Jameson's book is a masterpiece of Crewsian rhetoric. Crews claims that the book signals Marxism's decline in "certainty, clarity, and sincerity" (153).

Crews regards Foucault as "the Marxist to end all Marxists" (156), despite Foucault's often-repeated claims that he was not a Marxist at all. Combining "nihilism with activism," "Foucault resolved the theory-practice dilemma"—which had caused problems for Marxists from Philip Rahv to Althusser—by rejecting theory and embracing practice.

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But this move only heightened Foucault's disregard for verifiability. His celebration of Marxism's unaccountability "either to truth or to the Left itself" can only mean, says Crews, the end of Marxism (156).

Crews deems it odd that, after his rejection of theory, Foucault should still be included in a collection of essays about the return of grand system-builders to the academy—*The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences*. Edited and introduced by Quentin Skinner, the Cambridge political scientist, this collection treats key theoretical thinkers who are supposedly united by an inadvertent return to grand theory. Besides remarking on Skinner's vague and often incoherent introduction, Crews focuses on the danger of "liberation from the empirical ethos" that he finds characteristic of the subjects of Skinner's study. As Kant noted about such liberation in the long passage with which I began, the danger is the "emboldening [of] thinkers to make up their own rules of inquiry or simply to turn their whim into law." Crews warns, justifiably, against the real risk of "relativism that dismisses the whole idea of seeking truth" (163).

The Habermasian Exception

The risk is real. But Crews doesn't notice that his charge has been a key topic of inquiry by a whole range of thinkers—not only "post-empiricists" but also practitioners of what Crews calls "noxious theoreticism." Habermas is a central example, as Anthony Giddens's contribution to *The Return of Grand Theory* has pointed out. Crews's remarks about Habermas do point to important limitations in that theorist. But Crews is unfair in ignoring Habermas's own attempts to challenge post-structuralist moves towards relativism and anti-empiricism. I suspect that Crews's animosity against Habermas is partly motivated by the latter's use of Marx and Freud. Crews claims, for instance, that Habermas's attempt to "redescribe Marxism and psychoanalysis" is for the purpose of "absolv[ing them] from empirical scrutiny and employ-[ing them] for utopian speculative ends" (165). But Giddens cogently argues that Habermas's purpose is much more honorable: Habermas is not trying to avoid empirical tests, nor is he merely utopian; rather, he is trying to reintroduce reason and human freedom into the quest for a better future. Giddens explains that Habermas wants to provide a place for "the active interaction of human beings in their own fate." "When understood as a science, Marxism ignores what Habermas calls the 'self-reflection', or 'reflexivity' of human agents," Giddens explains.[2]

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Crews's charge that Habermas's aim is utopian, and therefore counter-empirical, is likewise questionable. It is true that Habermas posits an ideal speech situation, "where language and thought would no longer be distorted by effects of power, self-interest or ignorance." Such a situation "is the end-point implicit in every act of communication."[3] This may sound utopian but is not. Habermas does not contend that such a situation is the actual end of human society; it is an ideal but one that could never be fully realized.

Has contemporary "high" theory, the most genuinely powerful version of which is probably that of Habermas, quite abandoned the search for truth, as both Crews and Allan Bloom have alleged? Two notions of truth are at issue. One is that of Truth as absolute, universal and unchanging. This is a notion which few non-religious people believe exists or at least is available for our understanding. Some philosophers (such as Richard Rorty and Derrida) don't mind giving truth up altogether. But others, such as Habermas, maintain that one can give up Truth while retaining a useful notion of truth. As Giddens summarizes Habermas's argument: "When we say something is true, we mean we can back up what we say with factual evidence and logical argument—that a claim can be 'warranted' as Habermas says. . . . Truth refers to agreement or consensus reached by such warrants. A statement is 'true' if any disputant faced by those warrants would concede its validity. Truth is the promise of a rational consensus."[4] Factual evidence, logical argument, and rational consensus, criteria dear to Crews's heart, are therefore central to Habermas's grand theory.

Crews also ignores Habermas's emphasis on empirical tests and practice. Habermas proposes an empirically falsifiable philosophy of history that will promote human freedom and communication. If philosophy and empirical social science can work together, Habermas contends, the social sciences will not be limited by their empiricism, and philosophy will be checked against dogmatism. Just like Crews, Habermas is disturbed by the irresponsible relativism produced by versions of post-structuralism.

Habermas agrees with Rorty's (and others') critique of foundationalism and universals, but he contends that it is a serious mistake to abandon reason and confidence in "procedural rationality." In a remark that Crews would admire, Habermas questions the need to throw out the fruits of reason "when you dismiss the claims of a foundationalist theory of knowledge."[5] Giddens writes that "the guiding thread of all Habermas's work, according to his own testimony, is an endeavor to *reunite theory and practice* in the twentieth-century world." Habermas explicitly

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deals with the problem of failed practice in Marxism when he follows the Frankfurt School [and Crews] in condemning the Soviet Union and in rejecting Marx's version of praxis, given the political realities of our era.

So, while there is plenty of evidence in most literary journals these days to corroborate Crews's attack on anti-empiricism, he should give credit to at least one prominent non-literary theoretician who attempts to make empirical evidence central to his method. Habermas is especially important for our intellectual moment because, against post-structuralists, he defends a difficult but important position in holding that the critique of foundationalism need not end in relativism. Habermas writes:

> The validity claims that we raise in conversation—that is, when we say something with conviction—transcend this specific conversational context, pointing to something beyond the spatio-temporal ambit of the occasion. Every agreement . . . is based on (controvertible) grounds or reasons. Grounds have a special property: They force us into yes or no positions. Built into the structure of action-oriented-to-reaching-understanding is therefore an element of unconditionality. And it is this unconditional element that makes the validity we claim for our views different from the mere de facto acceptance of habitual practices.[6]

Crews's argument that "our most substantial theories always originate" "in concrete disciplinary engagement" could just as well have been written by Habermas in defense of his theory of communicative action.

Members of most literature departments will know what Crews means when he writes that "the rise of 'theory' has resulted in an irrationalist climate in the strictest sense—that is, an atmosphere in which it is considered old-fashioned and gullible to think that differences of judgment can ever be arbitrated on commonly held grounds" (xvii). But this does not justify turning our backs on all "theorists"; many, like Habermas, have engaged issues Crews raises. One might instance Hazard Adams, who proposes a theory of the secular symbolic that will promote a non-coercive culture; Rorty, who opposes figures like Jean-François Lyotard who "devalue consensus and communication"; and Charles Altieri, who develops a theory of ethical agency dependent upon values confirmed through ethical performances, to name only a few.[7] Regrettably, Crews perhaps too often lets his love of polemics get in the way of nuanced assessment. "Theory" is not a monolithic entity of irrationalism and relativism, but an aggregate of various practices. Rival positions collide with and refine one another. Kant noted that when "the arguments of reason are allowed to oppose one another . . . something

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advantageous, and likely to aid in the correction of our judgments, will always accrue, though it may not be what we set out to find."[8] Post-structuralists would add arguments of irrationalism to Kant's equation; regardless of the exact terms, however, his point is worth making and too often ignored.

Crews vs. Freud

Crews is best in insisting upon the connection between theory and ethics. His remarks about the recent scandal concerning Freud's abandonment of his "seduction theory" foreground not only the ethical implications of following one's own unsupported theories, but also the shocking responses of the followers of a great thinker when their "master" is caught in questionable behavior. Crews describes truly scandalous episodes from Freud's biography (and makes some very telling remarks about his biographers). Defying clear evidence, for instance, Freud recommended prescribing cocaine "as a virtual panacea." The resulting fiasco is well known. Another shocking mistake—his handling of the Emma Eckstein case—deserves to be better known. Despite "the patient's protestations of innocence," Freud attributed to the effects of masturbation the damage to Eckstein's nasal passage caused by the cocaine that he himself had prescribed. Acting on this foolish diagnosis, Freud called in "his beloved friend and hero Wilhelm Fliess" to operate on Eckstein. When the unskilled surgeon "left half a meter of gauze inside the remains of Emma's nose," Freud claimed her "subsequent hemorrages were the result of *longing*, probably at the 'sexual period' " (and he charged that "out of sheer resistance that *Frauenzimmer* has not yet given me the dates") (49). Such an incident, as Crews remarks, "leads to fundamental questions about Freud's therapeutic style, his scientific ethics, his feelings about women, his handling of evidence, and his loyalty to notions that even the most fervent contemporary Freudian would have to consider outlandish" (48).

Scholars should neither convict nor dismiss Freud of Crews's charges, but rescrutinize his work with less reverential eyes. Indeed, a more critical stance might ultimately be very useful to psychoanalysis. Crews's often polemical style precludes this balanced posture. He even implies that a position both sympathetic to and critical of Freud is self-contradictory. By conspicuously ignoring critiques of Freud by Karen Horney, Melanie Klein, and the whole tradition of contemporary French psychoanalysis from Lacan to Luce Irigary, Crews comes across

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as unable to confront counterarguments. He is likewise unfair to Ernest Jones, who actually managed to challenge Freud's views on female sexuality. We are still in need of a Freud who is fully understood in his historical context (although such intellectual historians as David Luft and John Toews are beginning to deliver one).

The overriding ethical issue, however, is not our moral judgment of this or that thinker. It is the tendency of certain modern thinkers to frustrate, in every way they can, the attempt to apply ethical standards to intellectual theories. Crews is precisely on target in identifying this issue. There are facts that have indisputable consequences and it is disturbing that influential theorists are allowed to ignore them. This issue moved from the merely academic to the painfully real with the recent revelations concerning Paul de Man's early anti-Semitic writings and Martin Heidegger's enthusiastic collaboration with the Nazis, which have given new power to Crews's arguments. What are we to think of arguments, which have greatly proliferated during the Heidegger and de Man scandals, that deny the relevance of philosophy to moral value? Consider Rorty's defense of Heidegger in light of the latter's involvement with Nazism:

> A bad reason for caring [about "the attitudes of German intellectuals toward the Holocaust"] is the notion that learning about a philosopher's moral character helps one evaluate his philosophy. It does not, any more than our knowledge of Einstein's character helps us evaluate his physics. You can be a great, original, and profound artist or thinker, and also a complete bastard. . . . There is no way to correlate moral virtue with philosophical importance or philosophical doctrine. Being an original philosopher . . . is like being an original mathematician or an original microbiologist or a consummate chess master: it is the result of some neural kink that occurs independently of other kinds.[9]

It takes little more than common sense to see how careless Rorty's analogies are. Granted, the character of a chess player may have nothing to do with his or her game of chess—although a ruthless character might improve the game! One can hardly imagine an evil mathematical theory. Even the thought of an evil mathematician is hardly chilling. The question is one of moral consequences, and chess games and mathematical problems usually don't have any. But the "games" of an evil microbiologist could have consequences, and the "games" of artists or creative writers can, too (as a brilliant new study of Ezra Pound's anti-Semitism by Robert Casillo demonstrates). The character of a philosopher—insofar as it is revealed in a set of beliefs—can tell us a great deal about

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his or her work. A philosopher who does not believe in people's rights to their own bodies may develop a theory that would justify shooting women who receive abortions, for instance. Philosophy has traditionally been an arbiter of values. In post-structuralist fashion, Rorty argues that philosophy must relinquish this role, that philosophy is just one among a number of disciplines that read texts but have no special access to truth. But even he does not deny the "edifying" role philosophy should play in order to achieve the productive "conversations" that he encourages. The view that the life and the ideas of a philosopher should be sharply separated is especially astonishing in Rorty, who has offered such powerful arguments against boundaries between disciplines.

Less simple-minded than Rorty's defense of Heidegger but equally disturbing are Derrida's and J. Hillis Miller's defenses of de Man. Derrida employs the jargon of deconstructionist discourse to argue that de Man's political position in his wartime writings is undecidable and his intention indeterminate.[10] Miller predictably follows Derrida's attempts not only to defend de Man but to praise him for perhaps attempting to subvert the Nazis through his ambiguous rhetoric! Tzvetan Todorov remarks: "The apparently modest position of . . . deconstructionists—'One can never be sure of anything'—actually displays an extraordinary contempt for all those who aspire to achieve a little more justice and a little more truth. . . . Absolute truth may not exist, but the extermination of the Jews is unquestionably a truth and not an interpretation; absolute good may not be of this world, but to denounce one's 'Judaized' colleagues as Heidegger did is evil, and to attempt to save their lives is good."[11]

Reading Miller, one might conclude that the press invented the whole scandal by means of "extraordinary falsifications, misreadings, as well as distortions and selective slanting of quotations." Quoting Emerson—"The new statement is always hated by the old"—Miller suggests that fear of deconstruction's challenge to the false objectivity of journalism is behind the "violence" of the media's response to the affair. He claims that the media are guilty of mis-reading or not reading the evidence: "The facts are almost all written documents." He lists what he sees as factual errors on the part of the journalists and notes, "the facts are far otherwise." This is a strange turn for a deconstructor like Miller to take. Articulating a basic tenet of deconstruction, de Man himself argued in the forward to *Blindness and Insight* that "the literary text can [no longer] be reduced to a finite meaning or set of meanings" and that "the act of reading [is] an endless process in which truth and falsehood are inextricably intertwined."[12] As Gerald Graff notes, "deconstructionists have

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a problem appealing to what politicians call 'deniability.' One of the themes of deconstruction is that the position you try to separate yourself from tends to reappear as a repressed motif in your own text."[13]

And yet Miller claims we can look at the facts and have one, correct reading. Eyebrows wouldn't be raised if a scourge of deconstruction such as Crews were to make such a claim, but Miller? As Habermas says about "contemporary poststructuralists, late-pragmatist, and neohistoricist" critics, "they somehow keep believing in the authority and superiority of philosophical insights: their own."[13] It is ironic that a practitioner of deconstruction should suddenly place implicit faith in the ability to discover facts, after building a career on the assumption that "facts are stupid things" (as it was once inadvertently put by Ronald Reagan). Habermas thinks this kind of logical impasse is characteristic of post-structuralists in general, for "they would rather make do without notions like consensus, incontrovertible results, and justified opinions."[14] One can hope, along with Graff, that the de Man affair "may make some theorists think twice about claiming that the reality of historical events is indeterminate, and that insisting on this indeterminacy is politically subversive."[15]

Martin Jay says of de Man: "Now that he has been forced to descend from Mount Olympus and his spell has been broken, we can finally approach his legacy without the piety it once occasioned."[16] He might have been talking about Freud or Heidegger or Foucault or the other objects of the attacks of Crews and other watchful people.

But piety will remain a problem. Deconstruction, Marxism and Freudianism, while still part of most graduate curricula, may no longer be considered to be at the cutting edge of literary studies. But newer emphases—cultural critique, the new historicism, and feminism—while offering a welcome return to the world of stubborn historical fact, are already acquiring the high-handed way with facts that characterized the various critical theories of the 1970s and most of the 1980s. In his recent review in *The New York Review of Books* of the so-called New Americanists, Crews applauds their scorning of "the daisy chain of indeterminacies with which the once dandyish but now crestfallen Yale deconstructionists used to caper."[17] But he also notes that with their "rapidly growing sway," these new approaches will constitute the "next establishment" of literary studies, thereby losing their oppositional status. Crews is already skeptically engaging the new establishment's interpretation of history and empirical knowledge, ending his new review with a Foucauldian remark about truth: in the literary academy, "those who hold power are right by definition."

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NOTES

1. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1929), 428–29.
2. *The Return of Grand Theory*, ed. Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 125.
3. Christopher Norris, "Philosophy as a Kind of Narrative: Rorty on Postmodern Liberal Culture," *Enclitic* 7, no. 2 (Fall, 1983): 144–59. I am quoting from p. 149.
4. In Skinner, 130.
5. Jürgen Habermas, "Philosopher as Stand-In and Interpreter" in *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?*, ed. Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987), 299.
6. *Ibid.*, 314.
7. The phrase about Habermas is Rorty's in "Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity," *Habermas and Modernity*, ed. Richard Bernstein (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 147. See also Hazard Adams, *Philosophy of the Literary Symbolic* (Tallahasee: University Presses of Florida, 1983) and Charles Altieri, *Act and Quality: A Theory of Literary Meaning and Humanistic Understanding* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981).
8. Kant, 449.
9. Richard Rorty, "Taking Philosophy Seriously," *The New Republic*, April 11, 1988: 32.
10. Jacques Derrida, "Like the Sound of the Sea Deep within a Shell: Paul de Man's War," *Critical Inquiry* 14 (Spring, 1988): 590–652.
11. The Miller and Todorov pieces are published side by side in *Times Literary Supplement*, June 17–23, 1988: 676,684–85. I am quoting from p. 684. Miller and other defenders of de Man blame the press for the scandal. While the press has been guilty of some very sloppy reporting about the de Man case (ranging from getting names of professors and universities wrong to silly generalizations about deconstruction), one wonders what diluted version we would have gotten if de Man's defenders had managed to control the story, as they attempted at first.
12. Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), ix.
13. Habermas, 307.
14. Habermas has most fully articulated his critique of post-structuralism and advanced his alternative in three recently translated works: *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 2 vols., and *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*.
15. Quoted by Weiner, 23.
16. Martin Jay, "Force Fields," *Salmagundi* no. 78–79 (Spring-Summer 1988): 28.
17. *The New York Review of Books*, October 27, 1988: 68–81. I quote from pages 70 and 81.

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Stanley Corngold

POTENTIAL VIOLENCE IN PAUL DE MAN

PAUL DE MAN: DECONSTRUCTION AND THE CRITIQUE OF AESTHETIC IDEOLOGY

by Christopher Norris

New York: Routledge, 1988. 218pp. $12.95 (paper)

In Christopher Norris's book on Paul de Man, the level of precision and the will to critical probing fluctuate. This uncertainty could have its roots in de Man's own work. De Man, of course, repeatedly attributed a high degree of rigor to the subject matter of his concern—"literary language." To many of his former students, his writing is itself a model of that rigor, worthy of idealizing and even of imitating—especially now that it needs support against the suspicion and anger loosed by the publication of his collaborationist *Wartime Journalism*.[1] Others may feel less fascinated after learning of significant translation mistakes in de Man's working texts of Rousseau, Hölderlin, Nietzsche, Benjamin, and Kleist—all of which appear to have been made for a single end. De Man is determined that all serious "readers" discover in all writers the same negative claim—namely, that whatever literary language is about, it is not about lived experience.[2] Or, as de Man puts it, "it is not *a priori* certain that literature is a reliable source of information about anything but its own language."[3] Finally, for many who were neither de Man's students nor ever came under his spell, his work, for all its obvious

The author, whose publications include *The Fate of the Self: German Writers and French Theory* (Columbia University Press, 1986) and *Franz Kafka: The Necessity of Form* (Cornell University Press, 1988), is professor of German and Comparative Literature at Princeton University.

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power and excitement, may seem in many places arbitrary and obscure.

This makes it hard to determine what labor of critical application is owed to him and indeed what, besides "its own language," his work is really about. It is with some temerity that one puts de Man's findings into relation with his own life and intellectual career since, according to him, "considerations of the actual and historical existence of writers are a waste of time from a critical viewpoint."[4] Norris's book has the virtue of formulating several useful questions, which are intrinsically connected; they concern de Man's critique of the allegedly unified character of the basic terms of Romantic and post-Romantic literary critical discourse. These specious unities include above all the unity of the self in author and reader, as it is established by acts of writing and reading; the unity of effects of beauty and "higher" knowledge in literary language; and the supposed intelligibility of an authorial career as it is organized around its proper *telos*. What is at stake, too, in de Man's critique, is the view that good moral and political effects could flow from what literary works "are" rather than from the by-products of their deconstruction. One topic which Norris avoids is that of the potentially self-exculpating tendency of at least some of de Man's critique.

A "Turning"?

Norris's book consists chiefly of summary exposition, but it also has a polemical bias. Norris wants to protect de Man against an error "persistently" recurring in the reception of his work. The error is exemplified by the attacks made in the early 1980s by theorists like Frank Lentricchia and Terry Eagleton, who criticized de Man's anti-historical, anti-meliorist, anti-political-activist bias.[5] It is important to realize, Norris says, that de Man's project has a practical component. It effectively opposes a mystifying and at least potentially violent set of beliefs called *the aesthetic ideology*. Especially in his later work—Norris claims—de Man practices deconstruction as a type of engaged ideological criticism, taking aim at "any kind of aesthetic idealization that would seek to transcend history and politics in the name of some mystified organic creed" (154).

This new political dimension is presented as the result of a "turn" in mid-career—the figure of the "turn" representing de Man's mode of thinking about his own critical itinerary modelled on Heidegger's way of thinking about his.[6] In his second preface to *Blindness and Insight* (1983),

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de Man sees his essay "The Rhetoric of Temporality" as constituting such a turn.

> With the deliberate emphasis on rhetorical terminology, it augurs what seemed to me to be a change, not only in terminology and in tone but in substance. This terminology is still uncomfortably intertwined with the thematic vocabulary of consciousness and of temporality that was current at the time, but it signals a turn that, at least for me, has proven to be productive.[7]

De Man's wording suggests more than a reliance on Heidegger for the trope of a turning in mid-career. The final concerns of both are centered on language, with the same anti-subjective, anti-humanist, anti-pathetic thrust.[8] For both, the individual human subject is an opaque though ineluctable effect of ordinary language use and, hence, marked by an "inevitable lack of integrity."[9] It could not constitute the full authority for, and the circuit of concern of, a reading of literature, whose task is to advance into regions lying beyond "moral good conscience."[10] And there, at least in de Man's case, the possibility is said to arise of a decent alternative to humanist political discourse and praxis.

When, however, Norris focuses on de Man's Preface to *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (1984), he finds a text that jeopardizes his thesis of a mid-career turn. Here de Man registers only the melancholy spectacle of chapters written over a thirty-year period that exhibit no decisive pattern, least of all a pivotal turning. But then, in a surprising move, Norris attempts to recoup this point for his thesis (in a display of the recklessness with which he tends to smooth out and avoid conflict), maintaining that de Man's disclaimer actually proves the turning, dialectically. If de Man here denies the existence of a turn, that is only, says Norris, because he did not want to make it too obvious to his readers. At a time before the exposure of his collaborationist journalism, de Man would not have wanted to call attention to an earlier period of existential self-absorption (recall "the thematic vocabulary of consciousness and of temporality"), arising from a mood of political disillusionment. He would not have wanted to suggest that he had ever had so much as to abandon "an attitude of political quietism—one that reads poetry expressly *against* all forms of delusive activist involvement" (17). From what vile commitment would it have been necessary for him to shrink back?

By the last chapter, however, Norris actually withdraws from his thesis of a turning in 1969. By postulating additional continuities in de Man's work, Norris can seek out traces of an attack on "organicistic" thinking even in de Man's early writings from the 1950s, lest the critique of

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aesthetic ideology, which is supposed to prove de Man's political rehabilitation, be seen as arriving too late. Without these continuities, and in the light of the disclosure of de Man's fascist journalism in 1941–42, we would be looking at a period of moral and political quiescence lasting twenty-seven years. So, at the close, Norris stresses the combative, anti-totalizing strain in de Man's earliest critiques of the coercive implications of such poetic figures as metaphor and symbol. After a brief and traumatic quiescence, de Man, reversing direction but not mode, would presumably have gone over from one sort of activism (collaboration) to another—to the activism of the critique of aesthetic ideology. I stress that this fluctuation in Norris's argument—his preponing de Man's turn from 1969 to 1953—is the result of his need to spare de Man the opprobrium of having too long delayed a fresh commitment to activist political criticism. Only such a commitment could constitute, for Norris, an adequate and explicit repudiation of de Man's fascist engagement in 1941–42.

As a result, the reader is left to wonder whether (1) de Man's late denial of a decisive turn is a bid to prove himself anti-authoritarian almost "from the beginning," or whether (2) his allusion in *Blindness and Insight* to a productive change is a bid to gain him the authority of one who, like Heidegger, turned for the sake of truth to more rigorous, indeed "inhuman," depths. It is true that unlike Norris, who speaks of "a decisive change" (17), de Man ironizes even his account of it in *Blindness and Insight*, wondering whether, "when one imagines to have felt the exhilaration of renewal . . . one is just restating, in a slightly different mode, earlier and unresolved obsessions."[11] And indeed, in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, de Man mentions that his work on Yeats, stemming from the early 1950s, is "already a rhetorical analysis of figural language *avant la lettre*, anticipating a mode that would become predominant for me."[12] Nevertheless, there is a crucial difference of tone in these prefaces and in the essays they cite. The question remains: Why, after claiming in *Blindness and Insight* that he had experienced a sort of conversion to rhetorical analysis (with all the political importance that has been assigned to it), was de Man unable to perceive any pattern in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* arising from the operations of this event? Perhaps it constituted an aporia, or perhaps he needed to have it both ways.

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The Critique of Aesthetic Ideology

The most important item in Norris's treatment of de Man is his identification of a "stance that finally equates right reading with the power to demystify forms of aesthetic ideology" (17). But this is also the point where many difficulties arise. For Norris, de Man came less and less to see "literature" as a source of aesthetic effects.[13] Rather, literature is that agency that disrupts all aesthetically rewarding syntheses of language and "phenomenal cognition." Unfortunately, Norris tends to put the target of this critique in so general a form that it easily becomes vacuous. At one point, the adversary is a certain postulate that "philosophy" takes for granted—namely, that "language gives access to a realm of phenomenal cognition which can then be joined up with those concepts and categories that organize our knowledge of the world" (79). At this level of abstraction, it is hard to find either the argument or the counter-argument intelligible and non-trivial. At other times the so-called aesthetic ideology is shaded toward the tautologically self-defeating, viz. it is "the high Romantic dream of a perfect unimpeded communing of mind with nature" (xviii) or, again, "the idea . . . that meanings, intentions, and phenomenal cognitions *must* correspond through some preestablished harmony in the nature of language and experience" (118). If this is the aesthetic ideology, then no one would want not to be against it; and one could be against it by just letting it dissolve under the weight of its silliness. On the other hand, if the critique of aesthetic ideology means that "language [always and invariably] fails to match up with the order of phenomenal or sensuous experience" (38, my interpolation), then the critique is plainly vulnerable, and de Man/Norris is wrong. Their claims are disproved every time I call my cat and she comes, every time I ask for beer and get beer—not Argyrol. Even de Man generously concedes, for example, that "whenever a binary pair is being analyzed or 'deconstructed,' the implication is never that the opposition is without validity in a given empirical situation (no one in his right mind could maintain that it is forever impossible to tell night from day or hot from cold). . . ."[14] And so it seems more peculiar than rigorous to look for an implicitly sinister political subtext (the "organicist" ideology of totalitarianism, which de Man is supposedly subverting) whenever an attempt is made to join "linguistic meaning" and "phenomenal cognition." One can certainly agree with a reduced form of Norris's claim—namely, that de Man was right to examine *literary*-critical constructions in which elements of so-called "phenomenal experience" (Nature) and elements of so-called

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"language" exterior to such experience (Rhetoric) are joined in an unearned way into a synthesis that pretends to be beautiful and therefore intellectually interesting beyond ordinary understanding. But this is the exact definition of kitsch, and it is false to give an heroic stature to the enterprise of smashing it.

What go overlooked throughout Norris's discussion are all the moments when it will be crucial to *resist* the felt "impossibility" of a "perfect" joining of rhetoric and experience. That is why, let us say, the survivors of Hitler's war struggle to give form to experiences that they cannot perfectly express. In the face of cruelty or monstrosity, it will be feckless, absurd, or suicidal to believe that the claims of experience are answered by this disjunction in general. Writers strive for representation, in pursuit of what Nietzsche calls "degrees of evidentness."[15] The critique of aesthetic ideology would stop this striving.

The Apolitical Character of Deconstruction

A rational political life arises from perceptions, choices, and decisions made possible by a postulate of minimal unity. Where men and women will, they will *from* perceptible objects *toward* intentional objects postulated as wholes continuous with an empirical state of affairs. Persons act on things of some identifiable kind for the sake of the identifiable things they *ought to become*; and both types of identification arise through at least implicit verbal articulations.

The critique of aesthetic ideology destroys the postulate of minimal unity—the postulate that allows for the identification of facts together with intentional objects that could become facts. For "language," according to de Man/Norris, "can never, or only by a species of rhetorical deception, state *anything* as a matter of fact" (44). The outcome of the critique is that things functioning as incitements of the will cease to be "facts" and that the intentional objects toward which they are projected by acts of will cease to be wholes. Indeed it is precisely because the aesthetic ideology conceives of the literary work of art as an "empirical fact" that it is politically suspect. For de Man the "empirical fact" is a prime instance of that specious unity which literature could never possess. The result, however, is that the critique eradicates the possibility of rational political action.

De Man's position has a long genealogy. In an early encyclopedia article entitled "Modern Poetics: French and German" (1965), de Man wrote of a generation of literary historians for whom "social, intellectual

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and political history play a large part . . . all start from the literary works as an unquestionable empirical fact."[16] This, according to de Man, is necessarily an error. "A literary text is not a phenomenal event that can be granted any form of positive existence, whether as a fact of nature or as an act of the mind." "A positivistic history that sees literature only as what it is not (as an objective fact, an empirical psyche, or a communication that transcends the literary text as text) is, therefore, necessarily inadequate."[17] The political goal of the critique of aesthetic ideology is, therefore, to assert and exhibit the impossible unity of any text or object or institution insofar as it can and must be conceived by articulations having the character of verbal signs. For not to do so would necessarily bring about the factitious "matching up" of language and "phenomenal cognition," would forcibly close the "distance that separates an actual experience from the understanding of this experience."[18] The possibility of that closure is, for de Man, the illusory grounding of the aesthetic ideology; more broadly, it grounds the illusion of facts for any will. A skepticism as radical as de Man's brings about the impossibility of action except as a leap into a zone of limitless and porous textuality, and it is as a result of an altogether understandable impatience with this obstacle that, to be sure, as de Man writes, "texts [sometimes] masquerade in the guise of wars or revolutions."[19]

In *Blindness and Insight* de Man was willing to say that "written texts"—not "empirical facts"—are nonetheless "bases of historical knowledge."[20] But when, in *Allegories of Reading*, he notes that "far from being a repression of the political . . . literature is condemned to being the truly political mode of discourse," it is by no means to say that something like empirical "historical knowledge" is possible. Rather, "the relationship of this discourse to political praxis [must] be described . . . in terms of the relationship, within the rhetorical model, between the referential and the figural semantic fields."[21] But this relation, as de Man repeatedly says, is essentially contestatory, ambivalent, and aporetic, permitting of no resolution. Thus, there might be a political praxis related to rhetorical reading, but the historical knowledge informing both would be unlike any specific, material, temporally bound historical understanding as we now have it. Nor would it lead to any knowledge except that of an eternally repeated moment of dissolution. Thus, de Man notes that in Rousseau's *Second Discourse* "the circular, self-destructive pattern of all civil institutions mirrors the self-destructive epistemology of conceptual language when it demonstrates its inability to keep literal reference and figural connotation apart."[22] This inability is inevitable.

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Even granting, however, the self-destructiveness informing the rhetoric of texts and the history of societies, it is disconcerting to find that in the same book de Man breaks the link between literature and historical knowledge altogether. In the course of distinguishing between two possible patterns of narrative informing Nietzsche's work, de Man asks "whether the pattern of this narrative is 'historical,' i.e., revelatory of a teleological meaning, *or* 'allegorical,' i.e. repetitive of a potential confusion between figural and referential statement" (my italics).[23] If one believes, however, that "political praxis" has to arise in some conformity with "historical knowledge"—at least in the form of a regulative idea of that reality to be transformed—then de Man has again reversed himself. In the first citation above, it was the confusion between figurative and referential statements that was said to provide the basis of political discourse and practice. But here, where "the confusion" termed "allegorical" is logically unrelated to history, it is inconceivable that any sort of political praxis could arise from it.

Earlier, in the discussion of de Man's "turning," I pointed out that what we saw was less a decisive turn than a reversal on the question of its historical reality. This indeterminacy allowed Norris to treat it first as an historical act occurring in the middle of de Man's career, then as an implicit figure in place right from the beginning and hence as hardly a turn at all. Now, once again, in de Man's discussion of rhetorical interpretation and political praxis, we see a similar reversal, the effect of which is to suppress the category of historical knowledge. I cannot agree, however, that this pattern necessarily earns for de Man the exalted characterization he gives to it in other writers, like Rousseau and Nietzsche, where it is termed "an allegory of errors" and hence "the very model of philosophical rigor."[24]

The Historical Provenience of the Aesthetic Ideology

De Man's critique of the aesthetic ideology is addressed to the so-called "triadic structure" that has often been extracted from German Idealist writers, including Schiller, Hölderlin, Hegel, Novalis, and Kleist. This structure is made to tell a story of individuals or human societies passing from simplicity and innocence to complexity, guilt, and self-consciousness with the prospect of some manner of "return" at a "higher level" to the wholeness of their origin.

It is also, unfortunately, the pattern crudely politicized in the 1930s by, among others, the infamous Germanist Julius Petersen, who appro-

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priated the Return—called by Petersen, following Novalis, *das dritte Reich*—for Nazi propaganda. This is a "move" with which de Man was no doubt familiar no later than the early 50s while studying the history of literary scholarship at Harvard; he probably knew about it in the 40s when he was writing for the collaborationist press. Hence, the knowledge that the "triadic structure" could lend itself to abuse by political theorists for the purpose of justifying totalitarian societies had been around for decades before the 1970s and 80s when de Man, in Norris's initial view, launched the critique of aesthetic ideology. Moreover, the view that German Idealist writers, blind to the violence in their own system, were themselves in some way responsible for their own misappropriation—a view toward which, in the case of Schiller, de Man inclines—informs the attacks on Fichte and Hegel by the "nouveaux philosophe" André Glucksmann in *Les Maîtres penseurs*;[25] for him, Idealist schemes ultimately authorize concentration camps and gulags.

In paraphrasing de Man, Norris does not mention de Man's precursors. He addresses de Man's attack against the hidden violence in "the" Idealist and "Romantic discourse on art, imagination, genius, and the reconciling power of aesthetic experience" as if this attack had never had a past. Norris simply concludes: "What is disguised in this idealizing movement of thought, so de Man argues, is the autocratic power and potential violence by which imagination may seek to secure its claims" (62). But principally where in "the Romantic discourse" is this "autocratic power and potential violence" to be found? "These possibilities are spelled out most clearly when de Man turns to Schiller and the idea of 'aesthetic education' "—i.e., to Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*.[26] For Schiller's project of overcoming "dissociated" thought and sensibility, says Norris, is actually "more in the nature of a subdued threat" (62). If commentators hitherto have missed the subdued threat involved in his plan of aesthetic education, that is because it is "hidden" in the constraints imposed by an imperative power of "aesthetic formalization."[27]

The phrase "aesthetic formalization" is not found in Schiller's *Aesthetic Education*. The idea of "formalized" dance figures (*Tours*) is introduced by Elizabeth Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby, Schiller's translators and commentators, in order to illustrate his view of "the dynamics of social conduct" in the so-called aesthetic state—I stress, the "dynamics of *social conduct*," an interpersonal category. The dance image bears only indirectly if at all on an alleged tensionless state of mind coerced into existence by the "autocratic power and potential violence" of the "imagination" bent on subjugating individuals.

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Space (and faltering desire) prevent me from exposing more than a few of the distortions, abstractions, and non sequiturs which thread through the de Manian/Norrisian "reading" or Schiller's *Aesthetic Education*. Yet is is, I believe, important to persist, since de Man's authority—and the importance of his implicit reorganization of the canon of authors who matter because they are lucid—rests on the claim of de Man's exceptional rigor and scrupulousness as a reader, his "analytical precision" (54). The chief source of the violence done to Schiller's text is de Man, and Norris follows along, evidently without consulting English or German sources. The sad truth is that de Man cannot be trusted to perform reliably even the most innocent of scholarly operations. His dashing essay on Schiller and Kleist—"Aesthetic Formalization: Kleist's *über das Marionettentheater*"—begins with a distortion, proceeds to a deliberate mistranslation, and moves on to a plain falsehood before beginning its parade of vatic comminations.[28]

De Man begins by asserting that Schiller's letter to Körner of February 23, 1793, offers in the model of the dance a description of "*the* perfect aesthetic *society*" (my italics). De Man's phrase already suggests that "alarmingly"[29] reified, totalized, machine-like entity—the so-called aesthetic state. In fact, Schiller is proposing in the image of a dance a figure for the reciprocity of social intercourse—the "good tone" of self-assertion and complaisance which men and women should follow in their behavior toward one another. De Man's distortion is quickly strengthened by his "modified translation" of the letter to Körner itself. Where Schiller writes of an "ideal of beautiful social conduct [*Umgang*]" with its "lively and impetuous [*lebhaft und mutwillig*]"[30] variations, de Man has him again propose the "ideal of a beautiful society" with its "decisive but arbitrary" motions. De Man's language, not Schiller's, could now begin to project a totalitarian machine. De Man then goes on to conclude that Wilkinson/Willoughby "cite the passage from Körner as a fitting description of Schiller's main theoretical text, the *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind*."[31] In fact they do no such thing. When, in a different context, they do cite the passage from Körner, it is because, once again, it offers "the perfect image for [the] subtle and intricate forms of social intercourse" which Schiller describes on the closing page of the *Letters* as actually found "probably" only in a few unnamed "select" circles.[32] To the extent that such societies do actually exist, writes Schiller, then it would be here that behavior is guided by the beautiful character of individual men and women, "free alike of the compulsion to infringe the freedom of others in order to assert their own."[33]

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The aim of de Man's misprision of the Körner letter has evidently been to identify Schiller's project of the ideal state as rapidly as possible with a kind of super-formal, literary—aesthetic—language, a systematic, machine-like affair of "arbitrary" tropes and "decisive" declensions. To this end he takes from Wilkinson/Willoughby's reflections on dance—and especially the English-figure dance—the category of "formalization," which he rapidly applies to text and state, investing it with a deadly menace, when it means for Wilkinson/Willoughby the fact that the steps in an English figure-dance are so precisely circumscribed that, as in a ballet, they can be noted down.[34] Recall Norris's extravagant description of "aesthetic formalization" as "the autocratic power and potential violence by which imagination may seek to secure its claims" (62). Schiller denies any such thing. He writes: "No privilege, no autocracy of any kind is tolerated where taste rules, and the realm of aesthetic semblance extends its sway."[35] Schiller's allegedly autocratic imagination enters de Man's critique of aesthetic ideology only on the condition that what Schiller excludes is to be interpreted as meaning what he secretly affirms. This procedure by denial is one which de Man and Norris allow themselves throughout the entirety of their analysis. Thus, de Man concludes his essay on aesthetic formalization by asserting, "The point is not that the dance fails and that Schiller's idyllic description of a graceful but confined freedom is aberrant. Aesthetic education by no means fails; it succeeds all too well, to the point of *hiding the violence that makes it possible*" (my italics).[36] Norris reflects: "For de Man, [Schiller's] promise is more a vision of the faculties as existing *apparently* in a state of harmonious freedom and grace, but *in fact* as constrained by an imperative power of 'aesthetic formalization' " (62). But what Schiller actually wrote in the Fourth Letter says the exact opposite:

> When the artisan lays hands upon the formless mass in order to shape it to his ends, he has no scruple in doing it violence; for the natural material he is working merits no respect for itself. . . . When the artist lays hands upon the same mass, he has just as little scruple in doing it violence; but he avoids showing it. For the material he is handling he has not a whit more respect than has the artisan; but the eye which would seek to protect the freedom of the material he will endeavour to deceive by a show of yielding to this latter. With the pedagogic or the political artist things are very different indeed. For him Man is at once the material on which he works and the goal towards which he strives. . . . The statesman-artist must approach his material with a quite different kind of respect from that which the maker of Beauty feigns toward his. The consideration he must accord to its uniqueness and individuality is not merely subjective, and

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> aimed at creating an illusion for the senses, but objective and directed to its innermost being.[37]

Schiller has given de Man and Norris the terms of their critique—terms which they violently invert. A theorist of deconstruction describes the strong reading as one determined to "follow, with rigor, what puts in question the kind of reading it thought it was going to be. A reading is strong . . . to the extent that it encounters and propagates the surprise of otherness."[38] In the case of de Man on Schiller, it might be imagined (though not easily) that the reading which de Man thought his was going to be regarded aesthetic education as libertarian, noncoercive, and generally desirable. It is true that de Man goes all out to discover ways to "propagate the surprise" of a reading other than this. Indeed it would be truer to say that he goes to any length, for where there are no signs that Schiller's text does indeed mean the opposite of what it says, de Man has no difficulty in going to places in Schiller that don't exist.[39]

Violence and Tautology

I have considerable difficulty with another of de Man's procedures. He cites a certain idea of "tautology" which he takes to be original with Wilkinson/Willoughby. In adopting this word, he appears to agree with them that art is "essentially tautological" in the peculiar sense of its having to express in many different ways an only limited and recurrent number of human thoughts and feelings.[40] That de Man found the idea interesting is not surprising: in the mid-60s, he had described criticism as the task which we practice "upon particular forms among different authors, knowing that they are 'windowless monads' and that basically they are all saying the same thing."[41] An example of *rhetorical* tautology in the sense intended by Wilkinson/Willoughby is the sublation of a term ("mirror") into a "higher" term that yet goes by the same name ("Mirror"): the figure of tautology testifies to the impossibility of saying the higher meaning other than "allusively."[42]

Now what is typical of de Man's procedure is that, after responding positively to this circle of thoughts indicated by "tautology," he now punctures, on these same grounds of tautology, the principle central to the aesthetic ideology—namely, "the paradox of a wisdom ["Knowledge"] that lies somehow beyond cognition and self *knowledge*, yet that can only be reached by way of the process it is said to overcome" (my italics and interpolation). I stress that this is precisely the sense of tautol-

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ogy that Wilkinson/Willoughby advanced and which de Man at first accepted and called original. But then, by a series of anamorphs, he proceeds to equate the terms "tautology" and "formalization" (which meant, for Wilkinson/Willoughby, once again, only that the turns of the figure-dance are definite enough to be written down). De Man is now able to assert that "as a principle of formalization rigorous enough to produce its own codes and systems of inscription, tautology functions as a restrictive coercion that allows only for the reproduction of its own system, at the exclusion of all others." A fatal menace has again been introduced (by violence and coercion?) into this circle of so-called transcendental naming and choreographic form where Schiller, Wilkinson, and Willoughby suggested none. "Tautology" is hypostatized, equipped with a system, assigned police powers, and given a totalitarian leaning, "excluding all other [systems]."[43] This is the so-called threat of "the aesthetic" lurking behind the image of the formal (and in an only speculative sense "tautological") English figure-dance.

But what purpose can it have to equate one particular sort of formal play with exclusionary violence just because it is, after all, but one particular sort of formal play? You have only to substitute the model of sonata form for that of the English dance to see how peculiar is the threat of coercion which de Man finds hidden in the form. What de Man ignores is the fact that Schiller's entire concern is with the reciprocity of dance movements. Dance is the model of a social intercourse governed by a double demand: (1) act out your freedom within the restraints imposed by your (2) respect for the other person's freedom.[44] De Man dismisses the factor of reciprocity because it spoils the perspective in which any obstacle to anarchy can figure as violence. (It is not that de Man abhors violence. Indeed he has gone on record as denying having any feeling about it at all—in the textual realm.[45] He is determined, however, to make sure that it is seen everywhere; and the most deluded critic is still he or she who, like Schiller, hides his or her consciousness of it. This logic is familiar as the *tu quoque* or Freudian riposte.)

De Man is inclined to this tactic as it affects, first, "tropes," then grammar, then—at the close of his essay—history, imitation, mirror, the fencing match of interpretation; each is arraigned for the violence it exerts in binding its parts by the rule of the very thing (or system) it is. Hence, it is no wonder that there is violence and conflict everywhere, and it will be found either "on the stage" or "on the street."[46] This is actually Social Darwinism in literary theoretical guise. I agree only that there is violence in de Man's arguments, whose "stage" bleeds onto the "streets."[47] De Man's preternatural alertness to violence could be the

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point of a comparison between him and Foucault—which must be saved for another occasion.

Ricorso

The gist of Schiller's model of social conduct is that each dancer enjoys a freedom to occupy his or her next position because every dancer, each following his or her own lead, yields with felt spontaneity his or her position. De Man has imposed on this scene of mutuality the idea of a frightening coerciveness.

What is his desideratum? What notion of freedom could dispense with a notion of obedience to form? Schiller does not say that one particular set of dance forms is supposed to govern individual human behavior forever or even all aspects of the state at any one time. He does not say that in the aesthetic state only one particular English figure-dance is danceable, "excluding" for all time any other English figure dance or indeed any other kind of dance. Schiller's 1795 poem "The Dance" reads: "Eternally destroyed, the turning creation generates itself eternally/ and a quiet law guides the play of transformations."[48] His stress is not on a single coercive rule but on the non-violent modification of rules. How in the absence of a formal principle as such could anything be distinguished from chaos? Would de Man have been better satisfied with the "bacchanalian revel" of the Preface to Hegel's *Phenomenology*, in which "no member [of truth] is not drunken"?[49] Yet, there, too, each member must also detach itself, and indeed each must vanish. How much rule is necessary to distinguish between the revel and the blood bath? Would de Man have cared to argue against the coerciveness of that measure of rule?

De Man's argument indicts the potential coerciveness of any rule in the name of rule as such. There is nothing in this indictment that could not also further fascism. In the fascist model, it is the unruly freedom of the individual that becomes mythic and violent. The critique of the dance, of the aesthetic ideology in Schiller, could begin to be a critique of the Nazis only when it seems right to assert a parallel between the behavior of a bloody-minded patriot jammed into a mass at a Nuremberg rally and that of the dancers evoked in "The Dance"—"each one a ruler, free, obedient only to his own heart."[50] That poem concludes in praise of "measure" and on a warning note to those who, in action, ignore what they have respected in "play." This is the aesthetic ideology

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which deconstruction salutarily warns us against. You have only to read this poem thoughtfully to see how violent the criticism is.[51]

On De Man's Fascist Journalism

Norris's manner of incorporating de Man's political background into his study is very puzzling. On his account, the main empirical pressure on de Man to forswear political action was the lesson of Hendrik de Man, who was *probably* his uncle. (In the mid-1950s de Man claimed in a letter to authorities at Harvard intending to scotch rumors of his collaborationist activities that Hendrik de Man was his "father.") Supposedly it was the experience of his uncle's frustration at failing to see socialism implemented in Belgium that left de Man skeptical about politics. This thesis is passé; to the extent that de Man's early experience of politics ever produced in him a stance of political quietism—the desire to separate the inauthentic history of the "outside" from the authentic history of textual interpretation—its cause would have been, not the politics of his uncle, but de Man's own collaboration. But here Norris pleads pressure of time: his own book, he says, was already in press when Ortwin de Graef's discovery of the 170 articles that de Man wrote for the collaborationist newspapers *Le Soir* and *Het Vlaamsche Land* (*The Flemish Land*) were made public. That may well be, but the articles are nonetheless mentioned and discussed by Norris. They are identified in the "Introduction" as "some articles he wrote during the early 1940s for the Belgian collaborationist newspaper *Le Soir*" (xxii), and they are mentioned again on page 158 (in a book of 218 pages). Yet they do not affect the central description of de Man's development in any discernable way. They are then treated at length in the Postscript, which rather hastily introduces the contradictory idea that de Man's political career is without a turning after 1953. It no longer needs a turning; it was politically active and emancipatory from at least that time on.

This makes the following questions inevitable: Why did Norris describe the articles in his "Introduction" as "some articles" rather than articles some of which are pro-Hitler, pro-fascist, and anti-Semitic? Why did Norris let stand his thesis that de Man's anti-political stance was forced on him by the failure of his uncle's politics rather than by the failure of de Man's own? And, most troubling of all: supposing that Norris did not know enough about the articles in *Le Soir* in time to introduce into his "detailed exposition" the effects of their damaging import, why does he speak of de Man's "admiring references to Kafka

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and other Jewish authors who had long since been condemned as decadent modernists by the Nazi cultural hacks'' (189)[52] while failing to mention the article in *Het Vlaamsche Land* in which de Man describes the ''degenerate'' branch of German Expressionist art as inauthentic, spiritually dishonest, and—''small wonder''—consisting ''specifically of Jews''?[53] Norris goes on to deny that ''de Man was at any time wholly given over to the purposes of Nazi cultural propaganda'' (189). This is not an historically informed view, as has been shown most recently by Zeev Sternhell, who concludes: ''The intellectual collaborator [de Man] placed the written word at the service of the new order in the same way as the volunteer for the Russian front placed his strength and his physical courage. And there can be no doubt that the occupier needed intellectual collaboration no less than military or economic collaboration.''[54] Norris may not have been aware, either, of the little book entitled ''Gallery of Traitors'' published by a Resistance organization in 1943, in which de Man's photograph appears along with mention of his ''excessive'' (*effrené*) propagandistic activities.

De Man's Violence against Experience

The following propositions are concerned with ordering de Man's views on ''experience'':

1. The idea of a non-linguistic experience, of an experience without interpretative articulation, is a philosophical absurdity.

2. The idea, however, that experience (which has a ''phenomenal'' component) and its *express* articulation could ''coincide'' is impossible. The notion that ''language, poetic or otherwise, can *say* any experience . . . is a highly questionable ontological presupposition.''[55] Indeed, the fit is more than questionable; it is impossible. De Man asserts ''the impossibility of making the actual expression coincide with what has to be expressed.''[56] ''As soon as the word is uttered, it destroys the immediate and discovers that instead of stating Being, it can only state mediation.''[57]

3. Ergo, ''true'' experience, as a ''coincident'' representation of an always already mediated immediacy, is a philosophical absurdity.

What are the implications of this syllogism for the autobiographical dimension of de Man's writing?

Any allegedly factual account of experience, any experience deceptively endowed with the stability of articulated fact, could always be split and divided, so that the ''original'' and the narrative of it would gape

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apart. More pointedly, the "original" would remain inaccessible. This is something which de Man alleges that

> we know to be the case from empirical experience: it is always possible to face up to any experience (to excuse any guilt), because the experience always exists simultaneously as fictional discourse and as empirical event, and it is never possible to decide which one of the two possibilities is the right one. The indecision makes it possible to excuse the bleakest of crimes because, as a fiction, it escapes from the constraints of guilt and innocence.[56]

When one thinks of de Man's Nazi propaganda and the chagrin he would have reaped if he had been exposed—when one thinks of the profound interest he would have had in denying the dominant, the sticking character of his lived experience as a "traitor"—one could have the feeling of closing in on an answer to the question that arises ever more insistently as one studies him: What, beyond anarchic violence and the aporia, is de Man's work about?

NOTES

1. This volume, *Wartime Journalism, 1939–1943 by Paul de Man*, ed. Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), might be more aptly titled *Paul de Man's Fascist Writings*. In one of the articles (in *Le Soir*, March 4, 1941), de Man declares that the loss to literature would be slight if the plan to deport Jewish writers were to become reality.
2. This is, for example, a point of view which Kafka sometimes held, but it is always found in tension with the opposite claim. For how could it be claimed that even the discovery of the nonpertinence of so-called experience to literature is not itself an experience?
3. De Man, "The Resistance to Theory" in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 11.
4. Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd rev. ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 35.
5. Frank Lentricchia, *Criticism and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 38–52, and Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism* (London: New Left Books, 1984), 100–104 and *Against the Grain: Selected Essays* (London: New Left Books, 1986), 149–65.
6. Thus Heidegger wrote in the "Letter on Humanism" about the "turning" which begets "[an]other [mode of] thinking." According to this mode of thinking, "every kind of anthropology and all subjectivity of man as subject is . . . left behind" ("On the Essence of Truth"; both quotations from

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Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings, ed. David Farrell Krell [New York: Harper and Row, 1977], 207, 141). The turning leads thought away from the "oblivion of Being into the truth of Being," which is "the simultaneity of disclosure and concealment" (Martin Heidegger, *Die Technik und die Kehre* [Pfullingen: Neske, 1962], 42; and "On the Essence of Truth" in *Martin Heidegger*, 137). For further discussion, see Stanley Corngold, *The Fate of the Self: German Writers and French Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 198–200.

7. De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, xii.
8. Their "vocabularies," of course, are different. Heidegger's is monoglot, proceeding by neologism on the basis of the roots of his native German, whereas de Man's is polyglot, scientistic, and aggrandizing—a learnt, heterogenous, American diction that incorporates the chief categories of every technical innovation in the field of "theory."
9. Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 279.
10. Barbara Johnson attributes this phrase to de Man in *A World of Difference*, paperback ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), xvii.
11. De Man, *Blindness*, xii.
12. De Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, viii.
13. As, for example, in de Man's description of Romantic language: "The *schöne Seele*, a predominant theme of pietistic origin in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature, functions indeed as the *figura* of a privileged kind of language. Its outward appearance receives its beauty from an inner glow (or *feu sacré*) to which it is so finely attuned that, far from hiding it from sight, it gives it just the right balance of opacity and transparency, thus allowing the holy fire to shine without burning" (de Man, *Blindness*, 13).
14. De Man continues: The implication is "only that the figure of opposition involved in all analytical judgments is not reliable, precisely because it allows, in the realm of language to which, as figure, it belongs, for substitutions that cannot occur in the same manner in the world of experience." "A Letter From Paul de Man," *Critical Inquiry* 8 (Spring 1982): 510.
15. *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1966), 236.
16. *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 520.
17. De Man, *Blindness*, 107, 164.
18. *Ibid.*, 56
19. *Ibid.*, 165.
20. *Ibid.*
21. De Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 157.
22. *Ibid.*, 159
23. De Man, "Rhetoric of Tropes (Nietzsche)," in *Allegories*, 116.

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24. *Ibid.*, 118.
25. André Glucksmann, *Les Maîtres penseurs* (Paris: Grasset, 1977).
26. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, ed. Elizabeth Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967).
27. I believe it is not without a certain sense of superiority that de Man dwells on the hidden violence in Schiller. Of course Schiller had been mocked for his pomposity, moralism, lack of dialectical delicacy, etc. by Nietzsche and afterwards by generations of clever Gymnasium students. Yet Schiller served as a rallying point for flashes of popular opposition to the Nazis. As Wilkinson/Willoughby point out, the Scholls—university students who courageously resisted the Nazis—were inspired by *Lycurgus and Solon*, Schiller's manifesto against tyranny. At the performance of Schiller's "Don Carlos" in Berlin, the Marquis de Posa's declaration to King Phillip: "Sire, give us freedom of thought!" provoked an outburst of cries and applause. It may even have produced the resolution to resist tyranny in an audience whose political sensitivity had not yet been entirely enfeebled by the suspicion of the "potential violence" behind such phrases. In his essay, de Man plays Schiller off against the crueler, more tormented, and also more conservative figure of Heinrich von Kleist, the Junker officer, who committed suicide.
28. De Man, *Rhetoric*, 263.
29. *Ibid.*, 264.
30. Friedrich Schiller, "Kallias oder über die Schönheit," *Werke*, ed. Herbert G. Göpfert (Munich: Hanser, 1966), vol. 2, 375.
31. De Man, *Rhetoric*, 263-64.
32. Schiller, *Letters*, 300.
33. *Ibid.*, 219.
34. On de Man's behalf, it could be said that Wilkinson's and Willoughby's commentary would allow for a *partial* application of the English figure-dance, of which a *partial* (and hardly major) feature is "formalization," to a *part* of the aesthetic state—namely, to the dynamics of social behavior. But the claim that "formalization" is the fundamental principle of the aesthetic state is ruled out.
35. *Ibid.*, 217.
36. De Man, *Rhetoric*, 289.
37. Schiller, *Letters*, 19-21.
38. Johnson, *A World of Difference*, 15.
39. Here is another, signal example of this pattern of misreading. De Man writes: "A degree of formalization is made possible by what is here called 'the tautology of essential art,' a term used by Wilkinson and Willoughby to designate the universality of 'thoughts and feelings common to all men' " (*Rhetoric*, 265). It is untrue, however, that according to Wilkinson and Willoughby, the concept of tautology "makes possible" the concept of "formalization"; in fact they are opposite ideas, reversing from one case to the other the relation between figure and ground. Secondly, Wilkinson and

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Willoughby never write the phrase "essential art" that de Man attributes to them. Finally, it is quite untrue that with their idea of tautology they mean to designate "the thoughts and feelings common to all men." For them, tautology indwells the "thousands" of different figures with which artists express the few basic thoughts and feelings which are common to mankind: the richness of figuration contrasts with the simplicity of the ground. "Formalization," on the other hand, refers to the power of human beings, in the gracefulness of their bodily movements, to supply an indefinitely varied and nuanced ground to the few basically repetitive (and hence formulizable) figures of the dance.

40. Schiller, *Letters*, cxxxi.
41. De Man, *Les Chemins actuels de la critique* (Paris: UGE, 1968), 86.
42. The phrase "allusively" comes from Franz Kafka, *Dearest Father*, trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins (New York: Schocken, 1954), 46. Kafka's text illuminates the point about rhetorical tautology. The particular view of literary language as tautology found in Wilkinson/Willoughby (which de Man misprizes) does not arise with them, as they take pains to say in their commentary, but with Rosalie Colie's studies of tautology as a figure of paradox associated with religious poetry. Colie writes of "the epistemological paradox"—of "the need" among religious poets "for a rhetoric to transcend ordinary descriptive, even metaphorical statements, and to express the transcendence which is . . . the subject" of their poems. Inevitably they manufacture puns. (*Philological Quarterly* 43 [1964]: 146, 155).
43. De Man, *Rhetoric*, 265.
44. Schiller, *Werke*, vol. 2, 375.
45. In "A Letter," de Man describes his readings as ones "that lay claim neither to hostility, nor to tolerance, nor indeed to any easily personifiable mode of relationship. With regard to concepts or to the fellow-critics I write about, I have never felt anything approaching hostility nor, for that matter, benignity . . ." (510).
46. De Man, *Rhetoric*, 280. The literary work is essentially violence (the violent dismemberment of meaning at the hands of the "letter"), *and* the possibility of violence lies all around our streets. The reading decision must see it in the one place, and it might see it in the other.
47. No more egregious example exists than the would-be triumphant howl(er) on which de Man's essay ends. To prove the violence and deadliness that lurks in such formal "systems" as above, as Man writes that the dance—which is in fact only an instance of "the extreme formalization, the mechanical predictability of grammatical declensions (*Fälle*)"—is the ultimate trap, for "*Fälle*, of course, also means in German 'trap' [*sic*]" (*Rhetoric*, 290). The trap, like the translation, is of de Man's own making.
48. Schiller, "Der Tanz," *Werke*, vol. 2, 719.
49. *Hegel: Texts and Commentary*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Anchor, 1966), 70.

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50. Schiller, *Werke*, vol. 2, 719.
51. The thoughts in this section owe much to a conversation with Professor John H. Smith of the University of California at Irvine.
52. Other commentators have also tried to mollify the harshness of de Man's essay on the Jews in *Le Soir* because it contains a remark favorable to a writer called "Kafha." At one point de Man attempts to distinguish the contribution of second-rate Jewish novelists from a genuine modern tradition based on the reading list "Gide, Kafha, D. H. Lawrence, Hemingway."

    Yes, it is true that all the names are in some sense deviant, and if de Man had intended to write literary history à la Julius Petersen, he could have selected writers more obviously racially pure or politically reliable. But an essay de Man wrote a year before makes clear the source of this quartet. It is subtracted from a quintet in Aldous Huxley's *Music at Night* that cities as the modern masters "Proust, D. H. Lawrence, A. Gide, Kafka, Hemingway." ("Le Roman anglais contemporain," *Les Cahiers du Libre Examen* 4, no. 4 [January 1940]: 17). In his article in *Le Soir*, de Man takes up Huxley's reading list in a way that is neither subtle nor subversive. I stress, furthermore, that Huxley's quintet of the genuine makers of modern literature contains one reference which de Man has dropped for *Le Soir*—that is the half-Jewish writer "Proust." It is hardly certain whether de Man knew that Kafka was a Jew.
53. "Blik op de huidige Duitsche romanliteratuur" in *Wartime Journalism*, 323.
54. Zeev Sternhell, "The Making of a Propagandist," *The New Republic*, March 6, 1989: 33.
55. De Man, *Blindness*, 232.
56. *Ibid.*, 11.
57. *Ibid.*, 259.
58. De Man, *Allegories*, 293.

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Kenneth Minogue

CAN RADICALISM SURVIVE MICHEL FOUCAULT?

FOUCAULT: A CRITICAL READER

Edited by David Couzens Hoy

New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986. 246pp., $45.00 ($14.95 paper)

MICHEL FOUCAULT

by Mark Cousins and Althar Hussain

New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984. 278pp., $27.95 ($11.95 paper)

Two new books on Michel Foucault—even two rather good books such as these—must provoke the question of why we should bother to read the man at all. He wrote, as Hayden White once complained, faster than we can read him, and commentary is multiplying even faster.[1] Much of this commentary is marked by what one can only call a spirit of inverted piety. How should we use Foucault? is the question Cousins and Hussain pose in their last paragraph, and out pops the cliché: "not uncritically" (265). Foucault's *oeuvre* (as we may defiantly call it in spite of his prohibitions)[2] belongs to a literature of social criticism. The unkind way to describe this genre is as an intellectual "ghetto"; the kinder way, which we shall adopt, is to say that Foucault's work grew out of a special kind of intellectual ecology, and the best way to treat him is to take that environment as our starting point.

The author is professor of political science at the London School of Economics. Among his works are *Alien Powers: The Pure Theory of Ideology* (St. Martin's, 1985).

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Philosophical Chic and Continental Thought

Foucault may be classed with a collection of Continental thinkers who have often been found a good deal more profound in Anglo-Saxon academia than home-grown Anglo-Saxon philosophers. They all in one manner or another adopt the Hegelian style of providing a theory of everything in terms of newly-minted technicalities. Each new such thinker coming into fashion thus becomes the starting point for a whole new academic industry of exposition, for the benefit of the Anglo-Saxon reader. Instead of asking direct questions about reality, we are guided to the difficulties of X's concept of P. In recent decades the running has been made by French popularizers of German philosophers, and one may be fairly confident that the shelf-life of most of them will be pretty limited. Prominent members of the class I am thinking of include Sartre, Lukács, Bloch, Gramsci, sundry members of the Frankfurt School, Habermas, Derrida, Lacan, and of course, Foucault himself. Some of them are, philosophically, an almost complete waste of time, and few of them will repay in understanding the amount of effort that is required fully to make sense of them. They are, in this sense, a contrast to our home-grown Rawls and Nozick (not to mention such domesticated Continentals as Hayek, Popper and Wittgenstein) whose works can rapidly provoke profitable discussion because they take seriously the obligation of lucidity.

If we thus rather sardonically establish the class of Continental Guru, we shall immediately be impressed by the fact that all members of the class are the progeny of what Paul Ricoeur has famously called "the philosophers of suspicion"—namely, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. All are united in the belief that underneath what is said and done in modern Western states, there is something disreputable waiting to be unmasked by critical intellectuals. Power, repression and domination are thought to lurk beneath the voluntary surfaces of modern life, and the Continental Guru is distinguished by the vivacity with which he manipulates these ideas, and the contexts he thinks he can explain in terms of them. It is commonly thought that such comprehensive critical analyses of the world can play a vital role in liberating human beings from whatever repressions have been diagnosed.

Most of these critics of modernity have occupied academic positions, but they stand in an equivocal relation to the tradition of the university. On the one hand, they are in a sense philosophers, and it is their claim to be revealing truth to us which is the reason we might wish to understand their thought. On the other hand, their most vibrant preoccupations are

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evidently practical rather than academic. They trail in their wake visions of profundity such as academic caution normally forbids. Those profundities often go hand in hand with distinctly mundane practical enthusiasms. Thus Sartre wrote dense tomes in the German manner, but was also to be found handing out Maoist pamphlets at factory gates. If then, as Wittgenstein had it, philosophy leaves everything as it is, the Continental Guru is not a philosopher. Nor is this ambivalent character irrelevant to the problem which faces the Anglo-Saxon underlaborer seeking to expound these bodies of doctrine. For it is often the case that abstruse and complicated doctrines in the work of the Continental Guru derive less from an arduous journey along the frontiers of reality than from some off-stage organizational dispute within the local ideological faction. Thus the fifteen-round bout between Althusser and Garaudy in France in the 1960s had less to do with Hegel and Marx, with humanism and anti-humanism than with the line-up of forces inside the central committee of the French Communist Party. It is hardly surprising that the heroes of such struggles might well begin to develop a certain contempt for their own readers—something which I for one certainly detect in the mocking spirit of Althusser. He surely cannot have been serious in telling an audience of professional philosophers that their only real options were to accept Marxism or remain petit-bourgeois apologists for the regime.[3] In such a *milieu*, skepticism about the whole idea of truth can rapidly become *de rigueur*. Such skepticism would, after all, be little more than the spread to a wider audience of the esoteric practices of the inner circle.

All Continental Gurus are thus united in believing that there is no such thing as a neutral and disinterested truth about the world. Every utterance, they insist, emerges from a standpoint, and every standpoint reflects its historical and social conditions. This is the basic doctrine, and, identifiable by the word "criticism," it appears prominently in both the works about Foucault under review. One is even entitled: *Foucault: A Critical Reader*. Quite what this means is not immediately obvious: would anyone want to produce an *uncritical* reader? The adjective would seem merely to be a boast about the self-conscious character of the assumptions in terms of which the writer in question is being discussed. Cousins and Hussain in *Michel Foucault* are also very keen on criticism, which they distinguish from that even more serious thing, a "critique." And they elucidate the difference as follows:

> A critique, as distinct from analysis on the one hand, or criticism on the other, is a device which locates itself as an analysis of categories of thought

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> and conditions of social practice from the point of view of their transcendence in history. (262)

Their example is, understandably, not Kant, but Marx, whose *Theses on Feuerbach* is said to be a critique "conducted from the vantage-point of the future, and its analysis of the present, or the actual, is predicated as a history." Wrapped up in this idea is the view that the philosopher[4] (a proud title now claimed by all manner of journeyman intellectuals) is in a better position to understand the character of his epoch, or his society, than "the man in the street." The vogue for affirming the superiority of activities self-described as "critical" dates, I suppose, roughly from Bayle's *Dictionaire Critique* of 1697. The tercentenary of this hoary piece of intellectual self-congratulation is approaching, and I propose that we should give it a massive send-off and consign it to oblivion. Words, especially the words used to characterise desirable activities like understanding, have their life-cycles, just like the rest of us, and it is time for "criticism" (like its equally well-known partners "crisis" and "struggle") to go.

Part of the reason why this vocabulary must go is that it is characteristic of the Continental Guru to write as if he inhabited Reality's off-shore island, whilst at the same time insisting that no such thing exists. Thus Marx, correctly characterized by Cousins and Hussain as "writing from the vantage point of the future" is also quite clear on the point that no such vantage point exists. Again, Foucault tells us a lot of things whose only possible meaning is that they are true of modern European life, while simultaneously arguing that truth is subservient to power. As Charles Taylor comments in "Foucault on Freedom and Truth" in the Hoy volume: "Foucault's monolithic relativism only seems plausible if one takes the outsider's perspective, the view from Sirius; or perhaps imagines oneself a soul in Plato's myth of Er" (98). A further reason for breaking free of this rather gamey jargon is that all of these writers adopt a philosophical vocabulary in order to convey an unmistakably moral message. There is virtually no discussion of that moral message, nor any real discussion of moral terms: everything moral has been cannibalized by the social. The point of it all, however, is a moral indictment of the modern Western world. It is this underlying moral message which produces the unique combination in the Continental Guru of cognitive skepticism with moral fanaticism.

There's no doubt of the intelligence of the average Continental Guru; nor also much doubt, I should say, that such people are often pedlars of a banal political message wrapped in shiny philosophical trappings. Most

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of them are melons of a season. No doubt any such general characterization will be unfair in various aspects. The indefatigable Habermas, for example, has an admirable tendency to break out of this ghetto and to go adventuring in real philosophical territory, coming back, for example, with booty from Austin and Searle which he proceeds to incorporate, rather ponderously, in his own work. But on a brisk and vulgar cost-benefit analysis, of a kind which the exponential proliferation of cultural products increasingly forces on us, most of them supply a thin output of enhanced understanding for a heavy input of time and concentration. And that brings us back to Foucault.

Foucault and the Unmasking of Concealed Power

Foucault would, I think, barely have got across the Seine, much less the Channel and the Atlantic, had he not had a saving interest in the concrete phenomena of social history. His books on madness, prisons, asylums and sexuality are alive with unusual historical material which is interesting in its own right. In an interview towards the end of his life, he was asked about bottle feeding, and he immediately seized upon this practice as one he ought to have looked into. This sense of the concrete—which is basically a concern with practice and technique—was integrated with a comprehensive account of Western experience.

Foucault is a kind of philosopher of culture who is deeply indebted to Marx and Nietzsche. One must insert "a kind of" because an evident feature of Foucault's style is evasiveness. Wherever a discipline looms before him, offering a home and explicating his practices, he rears up like a frightened horse, pouring scorn on philosophers and intellectual historians, denying that he is a Marxist or a structuralist, and always fighting off any attempt to locate him in accordance with traditional taxonomies of the understanding.[5] We shall later consider deeper reasons for what must appear as largely a willful evasiveness, but we may say, I think, that part of the reason is the pose of a self-conscious Parisian intellectual hero. Yet in spite of much intellectual posturing, Foucault has managed to escape the ideological ghetto. Whereas nobody outside a narrow politico-intellectual sphere would think of taking Lukács, Gramsci or Althusser seriously, Foucault attracts (in the Hoy reader) the attentions of philosophers such as Charles Taylor, Michael Walzer and Richard Rorty. Restive as they are, all find something of value in him.

How can we cut to the heart of what Foucault has to say? The central idea is clearly that modern societies appear to be free but actually they

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are in chains. His project of unmasking the concealed power relations in society derives from Marx via the civic republican tradition. In the early modern period, the absolute monarchies of Europe were commonly rejected by the educated classes as a stark contrast with the admired participatory republics of the classical world—a position expressed by writers as diverse as Machiavelli, Harrington and Rousseau. All of them tend to identify the subject of a modern sovereign with a slave. As Foucault puts it, elaborating what he imagines was the character of sovereignty in early modern Europe on the basis of evidence which oscillates between the theories of Hobbes and the practices of Louis XIV:

> The right which was formulated as the 'power of life and death' was in reality the right to *take* life and *let* live. Its symbol, after all, was the sword.[6]

Now this is a striking but by no means untypical piece of historical insensitivity on Foucault's part. Hobbes's sovereign had no right to let people live, nor did the absolute monarchies of Europe. Their right to take life was carefully circumscribed. However reckless they may have been in executive acts and in the waging of war, the sovereigns of Europe were categorically distinct from the despotisms of the East, of whom these remarks might, arguably, be true. And the careful reader will observe that the tagged on sentence "Its symbol, after all, was the sword" entirely fails to give any relevant support to the proposition to which it is attached. Standing back from this basic point, we may observe that the broader confusion in Foucault's understanding of the character of early modern sovereignty is rather more common than the muddle between sovereignty and despotism we have just considered. That broader confusion is the jump from the fact that Hobbes had a command theory of law to the idea that sovereigns operated in terms of direct commands and prohibitions. A law, according to Hobbes, acquires its authoritative status from the fact that it has, notionally, been commanded by a sovereign power, but a law is not a command and does not prescribe any particular line of behavior. A law attaching penalties to unlawful killing merely attaches to all human conduct the condition of pursuing whatever projects one has in mind non-murderously. Both this aspect of Foucault's misunderstanding of the early modern state and his identification of sovereignty with despotism are examples of what must brutally be called academic incompetence. And it is necessary to insist on this judgment, partly because Foucault's systematic evasiveness

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might lead us to take a charitable view of it (for perhaps we are judging him by inappropriate categories) and partly because only by emphasizing it can we begin to understand his real character.

Foucault's interest in the sovereign power of the early modern state is to establish a model of what overt and unconcealed power would be. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, European societies were transformed by liberal ideas such as constitutionalism, democracy, and the rights of man. Power seemed to have been tamed. Yet it is a curious historical fact that it was precisely at this time, in the Europe that emerged from the convulsions of the French Revolution, that a sentiment of profound hatred for the modern Western world began to disseminate itself in intellectual circles. Marx is, of course, the most famous exponent of this sentiment, and in this very broad sense, Foucault belongs to the same tradition. The intellectual interest of the movement was in turning appearance and reality upside down: what most people took as the broadening liberty of European peoples was interpreted, within this tradition, as the most cunning form of domination ever imposed upon human beings. Such writers delighted in exposing what they took to be the hypocrisy of the West: high ideals and low, greedy behavior. Quite how we should explain the growth of this remarkable sentiment is a difficult question, and we shall return to it. Part of the solution, no doubt, lies in the fact that most exponents of the sentiment were keen on revolution, and the practice of revolution evidently required a rejection of the complacent progressive beliefs of the nineteenth century. But in Foucault, we have the sentiment without the hope of release. Why?

What Foucault has rejected is the most common intellectual structure to emerge from this sentiment of European self-hatred. I refer to the melodrama of abstractions, in which an evil bourgeoisie holds down a virtuous proletariat, identified with the working class. This melodrama served its purpose well enough for a generation or two, but by the early twentieth century, it was clearly out of touch with reality. Revolutionaries as various as Mussolini and Lenin became revisionists, seeking new proletariats (for "proletariat" in this ideological terminology is simply an agent of revolution) in institutions such as the Party, and abstract classes such as women, colonial peoples and many others. Ideological politics in the twentieth century has been dominated by the project of finding a new proletariat. What distinguishes Foucault is that he rejects the identification of the proletariat not merely with the working class but with *any* other determinate group; he casts doubt upon the

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whole melodrama. Yet he in no way relents in the detestation of the modern world which characterizes the tradition.

The early modern state, then, provides Foucault with his model of overt and undisguised power, which he calls "juridico-discursive." It is associated with a system of control based upon a conception of a cosmic order in which an appropriate place requires an appropriate form of conduct. Foucault created an unforgettable emblem of this order in his description in *Discipline and Punish* of the execution of Damiens, who had attempted to assassinate Louis XV. But in the late eighteenth century, this form of order gave way to something quite new and more familiar to us. Charles Taylor characterizes this contrast as follows:

> Where the old power depended on the idea of public space, and of a public authority which essentially manifested itself in this space, which overawed us with its majesty, and relegated the subjects to a less visible status, the new power operates by universal surveillance. . . . Power no longer appears, it is hidden, but the lives of all subjects are now under scrutiny. (Hoy, 74)

Surveillance and Carceral Society

It is this idea of surveillance which above all explains the remarkable impact of Foucault. It is an immensely fertile metaphor which he has made irradiate modern life. And it makes one of the few occasions when Foucault strayed outside France for his central image. He takes it from Bentham's late eighteenth-century Panopticon, a plan for a circular prison which allowed the Governor the god-like advantage of constantly surveying what the prisoners in their cells were doing without himself being visible. Burke described this plan (which the British government in fact rejected) with distaste as "the spider at the centre of the web," and Gertrude Himmelfarb has argued that Bentham wished, himself, to become the Governor. But for Foucault, the Governor stands for all the intrusive experts thrown up by a modern society which can only operate in terms of vast networks of information. The psychiatrist, indeed even the physician, peers into the inner lives of the patients, his pen forever poised to note down bits of information in his file, and then subjects the patient to "doctor's orders." In the Foucaultian vision of surveillance, the doctor, warder, social worker, judge, and even the university examiner are all degrading their fellow men to a kind of inquisition, and using their expert knowledge to subject them to some regime of behavior. Such regimes constitute a *normal* manner of behavior, and the study of what is

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eccentric to this normal—madness, criminality, delinquency, perhaps any kind of rebellion—becomes a particular preoccupation of appropriate experts—spies, policemen and psychiatrists, for example. The eccentricity and the expertise are correlative. And just as the first move in this argument is from the image of the Panopticon to the imprisoned subjectivities of the human material on which the expert works, so a second move can rebound from such subjectivity to the social world we inhabit, to reveal that schools, barracks, office blocks, etc., are all merely less colorful versions of the asylum and the prison. Categorized and "normalized," modern man is subjected to a process in which power calls up knowledge, and every knowledge creates a form of power: knowledge/power.

But we have still not exhausted the idea of surveillance. For it calls up, and indeed derives from, the Nietzschean idea which so enchanted Parisian intellectuals from the 1950s onwards, that individual subjectivity is merely a historically dependent construction associated with a certain kind of social life. This idea is inverted Cartesianism. Whereas for Descartes, individual consciousness had been the basic building block out of which our knowledge of reality could be constructed, the new tradition rejected what it called "metaphysics" and took the subject to be nothing else but a reflection of a public world—culture, society or language. Another way of grasping this idea is in terms of solipsism. The early modern philosophers had taken the view that the solipsist who thinks that he alone is real was the impossible limiting case of subjective idealism. What we have here is the inverse of solipsism, a dissolution of the inner life into a stream of fragments over which hovered, like swamp gas, the evanescent coloring given by ideas like "self" and "will." This form of psychologism may be found in such disparate phenomena of French intellectual life as the aesthetics of the *nouveau roman* and the Althusserian theory of "interpellation." Leaving to one side the fundamental question—what is the truth of the matter?—we may observe that we have here to deal with a remarkable animus against individuality, moral responsibility, introspection and much else in the experience of Western civilization, especially in its Christian and modern forms. The basic doctrine is Marx's contention that man is a social animal, and that the mind is a kind of reflector, accurate and inaccurate, of the sensuous material world. But this element of reality drops off in the Nietzschean version of the doctrine, in which the subject is constituted amid discourses and lost in the immensity of language. Nietzsche had said that God is dead. Foucault went further: "man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end."[7]

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One of Foucault's particular concerns is to break up the familiar liberal idea that Europeans have become steadily more civilized and humane over the centuries. He is hostile to the idea of continuity which underlies historical understanding, arguing (or, more exactly, asserting with the usual miscellaneous swirl of considerations) that "regimes of truth" succeed each other abruptly, rather like Kuhnian paradigms in science, which derive from the same Nietzschean source. The widely received liberal story of modern European development would explain the move from the gruesome public executions of Damiens to the contemporary abolition of torture in investigation and (for the most part) death as punishment as the result of a developing sensitivity to pain, and of an argument about better ways of enforcing the law. On Foucault's view, this fails to recognize the systematic character of society and gets the order of causation wrong. It is not that a new humanism caused the softening of punitive practices; both, rather, were consequences of the new regime. So too was the modern form of individuality, in which the ethical gravity of human life came to revolve around human experiences rather than a public order.

In analyzing this new form of power—it is called "bio-power" and is constituted by the interaction between biology and history—Foucault is able to perform dazzling variations on the theme of unmasking power. It had been almost universal doctrine in ideological circles in the generations after Marx that sexual repression was the key to sustaining political domination; this is one of the reasons Freud had been found so fascinating. But already in the 60s, Marcuse had been puzzled by the increasing permissiveness of an entrenched capitalist society, and had taken the view that the commodification of sex was a diabolic ruse to keep the proletarians sunk in pleasure so as to prevent them turning up at cell meetings. Marcuse was a guru of remarkable simplicity and it is difficult quite to take him seriously; Foucault's case is very different. He has provided a subtle argument to show that the construction of sexuality as a natural dispostion upon which increasing attention was focused is precisely the terrain needed by experts in developing their specific techniques of mastery. The conception elicits a typical flamboyance of phraseology: Power was now "organised around the management of life rather than the menace of death"[8] and the new procedures of power that were devised during the classical age and employed in the nineteenth century were what caused our societies to go from *a symbolics of blood* to *an analytics of sexuality*.[9] In the original radical hatred of modernism, it had been easy enough to argue that the market, being a hard cold place, was a delusory form of liberation from feudal restraints. To demonstrate that

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the sexual permissiveness of the modern world was the opposite of liberatory was much more difficult. No doubt it could hardly have happened at all had not generations of radicals agitated the whole idea of concealed dominations; but if the argument that sexual liberation was really a form of enslavement had been made in earlier times, it would immediately have been recognized as a move towards a kind of conservative puritanism—for such is the character of political abstractions that the attempt to push too far in one direction sends the extremist hurtling willy nilly in the other.

Foucault vs. the Liberal Argument

But in order to see what is actually happening, we must contrast this vision of domination without a dominator with the liberal view of modern civil associations, as that view has been articulated in modern political philosophy. Without governments, runs the argument, human beings will be subject to the bullying of the strongest. The Hobbesian state of nature is a miserable condition in which fear and power are the key elements. Civil society is instituted in order to transform the equal vulnerability of human beings into an equal security under law. Within such an equal civil condition, each person can pursue his or her own projects, and whereas in the state of nature, only power counted, in the civil association, individuals will be able to prosper according to a great variety of possible talents—beauty, intelligence, industriousness, charm, luck, craftiness and all the rest. Hobbes has often been misunderstood (even by Locke) as subjecting the members of this association to the unqualified commands of the sovereign. In fact, as we have noted, the Hobbesian sovereign is a lawgiver and a guarantor of the laws, his other powers being merely such as are necessary to the security of the association. And within the association, the laws of nature as formulated by Hobbes are largely rules of equal good manners regulating relations between people. Critics of the modern world often point to differences in rank, wealth and influence between people in European states as unacceptable inequalities. Such things undoubtedly exist, and they do indeed influence outcomes, but within the limitations of what Kant recognized as inherent human crookedness, modern Western societies are remarkably egalitarian in their manners, and increasingly so. Certainly in modifying the significance of rank and status, they are far ahead of any other civilization.

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All of this needs to be remembered in reading Foucault, for although he is constitutionally averse to setting up an argument in equal terms, it is this liberal account of the modern world which he is implicitly challenging. Like all who have picked up the sensibility which takes the modern West as detestable, he sees power relations everywhere. On the other hand, he recognizes that repression is by no means an ubiquitous feature of contemporary society. This means that he must redefine what he is talking about. Clearly influenced by Nietzsche's view that the will to power underlies all human action, he yet cannot use quite this idea, for Nietzsche was not saying that some concrete condition of power was the object of each person's endeavor. Nietzsche was, rather, suggesting that human beings constantly act in order to restore their sense of agency. What then could power be? Flashiness of phraseology deserts Foucault here and his usual formulations are opaque. Here is one of them:

> It seems to me that power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as. . . .[10]

But why pile on the agony? Foucault's dilemma is clear. A straight and vulgar theory of domination, which is the usual stock in trade of the ideological tradition, will generate the required melodrama, but no one outside the ghetto is seriously going to believe in its ubiquity. A theory of power infusing and interpenetrating everything, on the other hand, will give the ubiquity required to condemn the system—but it will withhold the materials required for the condemnatory moral judgment. Hegel's dialectic of master and slave won't serve his turn because in its subtlety it reveals that forms of domination tend to do somersaults. Charles Taylor's discussion recognizes the problem clearly: whatever domination may be, however subtly dispersed, it cannot be a victimless crime.

Identifying Foucault

Without losing hold of the argument, we may at this point allow ourselves a brief digression to pick up the earlier point where we noted that Foucault, like his fellow Continental Gurus, was often, in academic terms, simply incompetent. A genuine philosopher seeking the truth and

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engaging in conversation with others who have been taken up by the same questions seeks the utmost lucidity, is himself the first to recognize the weak points of his argument, and however original he may be in opening up new forms of theory, will scorn evasiveness in responding to those who attempt to locate him on a disciplinary map in their attempts to understand him. The problem of power we have just been discussing is one which is indeed likely to send the inquirer crashing in intellectual shipwreck. But Foucault, though often more candid in interviews, seldom shares fully the character of the problems he deals with, and never brings out into the open the positions he is in the process of subverting. The interesting question, then, is what *kind* of thing Foucault is engaged in. And I suggest that we ought not to dismiss the idea that it is somewhere between art and prophecy.

Foucault has turned a metaphor into a vision of the world, and for the artist of course, there is nothing else to the world but that vision. Kafka no doubt enjoyed many times of ordinary human experience, but "Kafkaesque" refers to that sinister sense we find in his work of living in an alien universe subject to unpredictable and irrational demands. Foucault too has created a world in which surveillance enters every aspect of life, and every liberation properly understood turns out to be but a new and diabolic ruse of the system. Now to judge Foucault in this way is to develop our judgment of him as a Continental Guru. For it is characteristic of this species to be both intellectual and academic, to combine practical relevance with the prized objectivity of the philosopher. But such figures are always academically defective. Whereas the academic inquirer, who is concerned with the truth of things, is keen to explain what he is up to and to engage with criticism, laying out the difficulties of his position, the typical guru is evasive and equivocal, teasing his followers with repetitions, gnomic sayings, intimidations, irritation at not being properly understood, and so on. Above all, a kind of obscurity prevents any simple and easily investigable thesis being extracted from the material and gives the guru the power of sponsoring some of the interpretations he elicits and repudiating others. In Foucault's case, these devices are found in his repudiation of the two major disciplines to which his work belongs—history, especially the history of ideas, and philosophy. Historians in particular have panted along in his wake pointing out the tendentiousness of his account of earlier passages of history, while the philosopher Rorty argues that he has nothing so conventional as a theory of knowledge to offer; rather does he reject all theory. Rorty's conclusion is:

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> We can be grateful to Foucault for doing another of the things philosophers are supposed to do—reaching for speculative possibilities that exceed our present grasp, but may nevertheless be our future. (Hoy, 47–48)

It is clear, then, that Foucault has sailed right out of the paradigm, and it may be (as Rorty suggests) that this is because he is pushing on into unknown waters; or it may be that his radical essence (a form of anarchism which Rorty thinks is merely "chic") has brought him to a point where he may legitimately be judged as in academic terms either incompetent or dishonest. Neither judgment seems quite appropriate, but we are left with whole strings of problems: a thesis that denies the possibility of truth is by Foucault being advanced as being the truth, an insistence on discontinuity which does not take seriously the abundant evidence for continuity and overlap, a belief in homogeneous cultural wholes which simply refuses to recognize the evidence of heterogeneity of styles of thought, and so on.

As Taylor remarks, "Foucault's attraction is partly that of a *terrible simplificateur*" (Hoy, 82). But it is the *nature* of the simplification which must be grasped. In discussing asylums and prisons, Foucault presents us with information about the relevant technique and its intellectual and institutional consequences. His claim is to focus on these *practices* in a way no one has done before. But it is a curious kind of practicality, which entirely omits the *point* of the procedures with which it deals. Why were people worried about crime or insanity? The simple but vital point of the whole business has been left out, and with it goes the whole distinction between theory and practice. Foucault presents us with an entirely static world consisting of strings of deductions, and it hardly matters whether we say it is entirely theoretical, or that it is concerned with (an abstract aspect of) practices. What has dropped from sight is the practical problem as problem. It seems plausible, then, to treat Foucault as the proprietor of an undoubtedly stimulating artistic vision which has been couched in misleadingly academic terms. And its importance, I suggest, is the light it sheds on the predicament of contemporary radicalism.

The Predicament of Radicalism

Radicalism, or ideology, as I am considering it, shuttles between two preoccupations: domination and liberation. The link between them is

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the practice of revolution, or struggle. But the viability of the idea of liberation has been virtually destroyed in the West during this century by two things: first, the consistent failure of revolutionaries in Western states to get themselves taken seriously; and second, the horror of what has happened in the rest of the world when the project did actually get to first base. The undesirable consequences of actual revolution, however, have not reconciled radicals to modernity, as one might imagine. On the contrary, the loss of utopia seems merely to have intensified their hatred of the actual world we live in. I take Foucault's work to be an expression of that hatred, but one which takes the loss of the polarity of liberation with entire seriousness. The response of his fellow radicals has been variable. Some are dismayed at his rejection of the possibilities of liberation, others exhilarated by the unrivalled scope of what, in these terms, can be taken as a rip-roaring denunciation of the modern world.

My own inclination is to take Foucault's work as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the whole concept of liberation. From the Greeks through to Rousseau, it has been common ground that slaves can never liberate themselves; anyone who really is a slave cannot really conceive of freedom. This generates the paradox of liberation: if liberation is a possibility, then the domination or enslavement can never have been serious in the first place. To take this paradox seriously has momentous consequences. The revolutionary understands himself to be on a totally different level from others in the political field seeking to advance one cause or another, and properly ideological theories are constructed in such a way as to validate that specialness. But if neither domination nor liberation in their fullest sense can be taken seriously, then ideology collapses, and we are back in the liberal democratic conception of political life, in which different groups, all basically on the same level, are campaigning for whatever they seek. Imperfection is endemic, but there is no cause for desperation. Foucault's work thus assembles many of the considerations which expose the simple radical melodrama for the absurdity it is. This was certainly not Foucault's intention. There are indeed signs, noted by Taylor, that towards the end of his life he was moving towards some more positive characterization of how power might dissolve: "if you know what is suitable to hope for and what are the things on the contrary which should be completely indifferent for you, if you know, finally that you should not fear death, well, then, you cannot abuse your power over others." There would seem little future in such positivity. Even classical echoes cannot save these reflections from banality. Foucault's destiny in this area has been to push a negative to its limit.

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Taylor seems to take a similar view, and he has brilliantly elaborated conceptual reasons for doing so. He beings with admiration for the way in which Foucault has unmasked hidden structures of power and a corresponding dismay that he rejects the liberations which his evaluations would seem to entail: liberations arising in truth, and freedom. Domination, Taylor argues, must impose on its victim some frustration of desires, or of interests. Power may thus frustrate conscious and explicit desires, or it may deform behavior in oblique and unrecognized ways, but it cannot merely just be there, without consequences. And these consequences must be limits on freedom and understanding. "But this means that 'power' belongs in a semantic field from which 'truth' and 'freedom' cannot be excluded" (Hoy, 91). There may indeed be all sorts of contingent reasons why this or that domination cannot be lifted but that is quite different from Foucault's argument that the very idea of liberation is misconceived. Taylor argues that power entails liberation, *or* liberty. The fact that he uses both these words indifferently on the same page (Hoy, 92) is, I suggest, evidence of some confusion in his own thought, for "liberty" (which we all enjoy) is quite different from the ideological idea of "liberation," which refers to the promised utopia beyond repression.

My interest in this nexus of thought is, then, to claim that Foucault has unwittingly demonstrated the predicament of the radical passion for discovering sinister kinds of power in all contemporary (or indeed imaginable) human relationships. In contesting Foucault's pessimism about liberty, Taylor is also rejecting the other prong of the radical fork: that everything modern is subject to domination. The howl of the radical bereft of his melodrama can already be heard in the land, and it is what makes Foucault such an ambivalent and interesting figure.

NOTES

1. A good account of the progress of this commentary, along with a study of Foucault's relations with the discipline of history can be found in Allan Megill, "The Reception of Foucault by Historians," *The Journal of the History of Ideas* 48, no. 1., Jan.-Mar. 1987: 117-41.
2. "Can one even . . . speak of Foucault? Is there an author and an *oeuvre*?" Thus Garth Gillan, "Foucault's Philosophy" in James Bernauer and David Rasmussen, eds., *The Final Foucault* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1988), 34.
3. See "Lenin and Philosophy" in Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London: New Left Books, 1971).

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4. It should be remembered that Nietzsche wrote as a philosopher, but devoted many of his aphorisms to abusing and deriding philosophy and philosophers. This is a technique of brand differentiation widely imitated by the Continental Guru.
5. "I want to deal . . . with his political theory—though he insists that he doesn't have one" writes Michael Walzer in "The Politics of Michel Foucault" in the Hoy volume, on p.51. In his first few pages, Walzer admirably takes Foucault's Nietzchean ineffabilities by the scruff of the neck and gives them a good shaking.
6. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality,* vol. 1, *An Introduction* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), 136.
7. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970), 387.
8. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 147.
9. *Ibid.*, 148.
10. *Ibid.*, 92.
11. *The Final Foucault*, interview, 8.

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Mark Poster

WHY NOT TO READ FOUCAULT

FOUCAULT

by J. G. Merquior

Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985. 188pp., $8.95 (paper)

In the three years from 1982 through 1984 at least eight books were published in English on the work of Michel Foucault: Charles Lemert and Garth Gillan, *Michel Foucault: Social Theory as Transgression* (N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1982); Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Pamela Major Poetzl, *Michel Foucault's Archaeology of Western Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983); Barry Smart, *Foucault, Marxism and Critique* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983); Karl Racevskis, *Michel Foucault and the Subversion of Intellect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); John Rajchman, *Michel Foucault* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); Mark Cousins and Althar Hussain, *Michel Foucault* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984); and Mark Poster, *Foucault, Marxism and History* (New York: Blackwell, 1984). In 1985, J. G. Merquior added another entitled simply *Foucault*.

Merquior's book is distinguished from all earlier efforts in one decisive respect: it is written for those who, not having read Foucault, wish to be convinced that they should not bother to do so. *Foucault* is a polemic against Foucault, one with many drawbacks. In particular Merquior is woefully ignorant of the poststructuralist theoretical context in which Foucault wrote and shallow in his understanding of theoretical issues Foucault raised concerning the discipline of history.

The author is professor of history at the University of California, Irvine.

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At the level of argument *Foucault* is incoherent, contradictory, abusive. Merquior is unable to define the theoretical concerns that animated Foucault's work, owing in part to his failure to understand the French theoretical scene since the 1960s. He repeatedly incorrectly defines Foucault as a "structuralist," for example. Foucault, as Merquior knows, rejected that classification so anyone choosing to defy an author's feelings on such matters has the obligation to have good reasons for doing so. Far from providing a convincing rationale for dubbing Foucault a structuralist, Merquior never elaborates a satisfactory definition of structuralism. His most extensive discussion of the term is the following sentence: "For if there is one thing upon which they [structuralists] agree, it is that the idea of a founding, grounding subject ought to be abandoned, since (they claim) it implies the primacy of a transparent consciousness and a fatal neglect of . . . hidden, unconscious determinations of thought" (17). This sentence is simply incorrect.

Lévi-Strauss, the only major recent French thinker to adopt the term structuralist, and Saussure, the figure generally regarded as the founder of structuralist linguistics, both believed firmly in "a founding, grounding subject." They believed their own work was scientific and that the subject of science was not at all problematic. They rejected the standpoint of the subject only as the intelligible object of knowledge and they did so for very strong reasons, reasons of which Merquior seems unaware. Saussure's analysis of language led him to argue that language is constituted by relational differences that must be *constructed* by the social scientist because they are systematically unavailable to speaking subjects. However one may choose to respond to this argument it is important to state that it is not Foucault's position at all.

Foucault and other poststructuralists were fascinated by the structuralist position mainly because it broke with philosophical traditions (such as Sartre's) that privilege the vantage point of the subject. This break allowed them to define the limits of a whole tradition of thinking variously termed "humanism" or "logocentrism." What interested Foucault was a critique of the implications of privileging the subject, specifically the autonomous rational subject. Within the "humanist" tradition, the subject was associated with freedom and critique, but the poststructuralists uncovered a dimension by which that subject is now (1) a support for certain forms of social domination and (2) a basis for a totalizing and reductionist set of discourses. These arguments have nothing to do with structuralism for the very simple reason that poststructuralists like Foucault and Derrida applied their critique of humanism to structuralism as well.

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Merquior's lack of familiarity with poststructuralist thought is evident as well in the way he discusses figures who are in Foucault's intellectual milieu. Jean-François Lyotard is mentioned only indirectly as someone criticized by Jürgen Habermas. Jean Baudrillard is mentioned because he wrote an essay critical of Foucault. Derrida is cited as a "challenger" and "rival" of Foucault—claims which are never explained—but his affinities with Foucault are omitted. Derrida's work is incorrectly presented as "a radical reprise of Saussure's theory of structural linguistics" (13). Gilles Deleuze, no doubt Foucault's closest intellectual colleague, is mentioned in passing several times. Again without any rigorous textual analysis or sustained argument Deleuze appears simply as "neo-Nietzschean." A commentator is not obliged to have sympathy for his or her subject, but certainly a familiarity, hopefully a mastery, of the subject's intellectual world is desirable. Unfortunately Merquior cannot be credited with such expertise.

At the level of organization and content, Merquior's study is a summary of critiques, mainly by historians, of each of Foucault's major works. Chapters are devoted to *Madness and Civilization, The Birth of the Clinic, The Order of Things, The Archaeology of Knowledge, Discipline and Punish*, the essays and interviews of the 1970s collected as *Power/Knowledge*, and the three volumes of *The History of Sexuality*. This is a fair enough sampling of Foucault's texts, though it does omit important essays on art and literature such as *Raymond Roussel, Death and the Labyrinth* and *This Is Not a Pipe*. Each chapter contains very short summaries of the main themes of its subject text followed by polemical critiques which extensively cite reviews, interviews, and other published works which claim to show that Foucault was a terrible historian. Foucault is here variously accused of not having done his homework ("one of the main weaknesses in his scholarship [is] the often noticed fact that he was not conversant with the rich scholarly literature on these subjects" [44]); engaging in theoretical obfuscation ("Foucault definitely prefers ideological drama to the wayward contingencies of actual history [97]); being dismissive and arrogant toward matters of epistemology ("He is not a bit concerned with the truth of knowledge [71]); simply being incorrect ("*The Order of Things* . . . often distorts the history of knowledge . . ." [71]; in reference to *The Birth of the Clinic*: "what Foucault offers can be considered . . . a brazen historical caricature . . . [99] and finally on *Discipline and Punish*: "Foucault seems to get some of his most important facts wrong" [102]).

Many of the criticisms of Foucault's work are no doubt valid, as would be the case with any scholar or intellectual, especially one who,

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like Foucault, boldly ranges across very different subjects and through two millennia of the European past. But Merquior's text marshals the evidence like a lawyer eager for a conviction. The general intellectual level of his criticism falls far below that necessary for a sustained treatment of his subject. He is simply out of his depth. Most saliently, he does not confront the problem of theory in history. Instead he opposes the "truth" to Foucault's Procrustean ideological bed, repeating the naive empiricist saw. But the historical problem (indeed the problem of knowledge in general) is not nearly so simpleminded.

Theoretical and empirical work are interconnected: neither is very satisfying without the other. Concepts, principles of selection of data, explanatory strategies, hypotheses, political perspectives—all of these inform discourse in every discipline. At a minimum these elements of theory are reminders that no one has unmediated access to truth, that data are always shaped by the concerns of the knower in his/her present, that an insurmountable gap exists between the knower and the known, one that is always bridged in the production of discourse but one that always bears the traces of that bridge being crossed. To accuse someone of having a theory that "distorts the truth," as Merquior does Foucault, is to say that one does not have much liking for that particular theory. It says more about the addressor than it does about the addressee.

Because Merquior is committed to a nineteenth-century view of knowledge as progress and because he is not self-conscious about his commitment, he is particularly ill equipped to confront the challenge Foucault launches against the discipline of history. For Foucault calls into question the truth effects of the disciplines, especially that of history. He disputes the claims to legitimacy of the social sciences and humanities, their progressivist assumption of cumulative knowledge. Instead Foucault historicizes the production of knowledge. He attempts to demonstrate that late twentieth-century society sustains a relation of mutual legitimacy with the disciplines, that a chief effect of knowledge is to reinforce domination ("technologies of power"), and that a chief effect of social practices is to reinforce the stability of the disciplines. While the disciplines are grounded in Enlightenment views of the association of reason/knowledge with freedom, once institutionalized in industrial societies, these factories of discourse take on effects which may not be intended by the individuals certified to produce them but are nonetheless real.

While this critique of disciplinary knowledge may have affinities with neoMarxist and other tendencies, Foucault made advances in three directions: (1) he showed how the foundational dichotomy between

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knowledge and power serves to shield the disciplines from effective critique; (2) he showed how discourse may be decoded *at the level of the text* (notions of archive, statement, enunciation, regularity in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*) rather than simply at the contextual level such as is the case with the concept of the mode of production (Marx) or the will to power (Nietzsche) or unconscious desire (Freud); and (3) he carried out studies that proceeded from a theoretical stance that embodied these critiques. I maintain that this third point is what evinces so much criticism, often an ill-founded sort.

For Foucault dared to practice a new form of discourse, one that, while in some ways resembling ordinary historical discourse, in fact departed both from the canons of that discipline and from the traditions of critique that the disciplines had already either assimilated (in the case of Marxist history) or denounced as irrationalism (in the case of Nietzschean genealogy). An assessment of the value of Foucault's contribution to history must be based on a recognition of the critical nature of his intentions and an estimate of the value of that critique in the current historical context. If one assumes that Marxist and liberal forms of historical discourse are adequate, as Merquior does at least for liberal historiography, then obviously Foucault does not have much of value to say. But if there is a problem with current historical practice, as I believe there is, then it behooves the critic to make a serious effort to comprehend what Foucault has done *from within*.

In my judgment poststructuralists have raised serious objections to the foundational assumptions of historical discourse, indeed of the humanities and social sciences in general. They have shown that these discourses have become, perhaps unwittingly, complicit with the forms of domination in bureaucratic and capitalist societies. The disciplines have lost their critical edge and have become supporters and legitimizers of major structures of domination. One large problem is that liberal and Marxist discourse protects the boundaries through which the autonomous, rational subject insulates itself from the world and constitutes itself as an authorized knower of that world while excluding other forms of subjectivity from having a similar, representational voice. These other forms of subjectivity, for example certain feminist and non-Western types, are invalidated or marginalized to greater or lesser degrees. Merquior does not state the perspective from which he speaks but I imagine he identifies with a certain combination of liberal, technicist and bureaucratic positions.

Telling critiques may certainly be made of Foucault from such perspectives but only if the author acknowledges his or her position and

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explores Foucault's in depth. Merquior, doing neither, hides behind the simple defense of the discipline, behind the screen of an alleged progress in knowledge achieved by historians, rather than searching deeply for possible problems that need to be worked on and may, in fact, stimulate new lines of departure for the discipline. In the end Merquior's jeremiad becomes tiresome for the reader who may be interested in learning about Foucault's thought, or even in an intelligent defense of liberal/Marxist history.

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